BANIKANTA KAKATI MEMORIAL LECTURES, 1954

THE PLACE OF ASSAM IN THE HISTORY AND CIVILISATION OF INDIA

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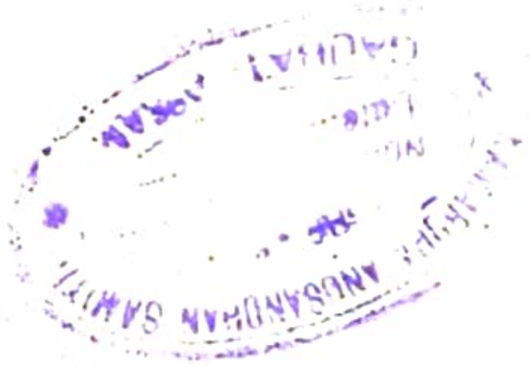

FOREWORD

The Banikanta Kakati Lectures were founded in 1953 in memory of Dr. B. K. Kakati, Professor of Assamese at this University, who died in November 1952. Dr. Kakati's services to the University were too great to be adequately honoured by any such memorial. Nevertheless it was decided to invite eminent scholars every two years to deliver a series of lectures at the University on Indologial subjects in which Dr. Kakati was deeply interested.

I am grateful to my friend Dr. S. K. Chatterji for consenting to deliver the first lectures on a subject on which both he and Dr. Kakati could speak with authority.

Our thanks are due to Dr. B. K. Barua, the successor of Dr. Kakati in the chair of Assamese literature, for organising the collection of funds for instituting these lectures.

Gauhati
9.2.55

K. K. HANDIQUI,
Vice-Chancellor

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LECTURE I

In Memoriam : Banikanta Kakati

Before commencing the subject of my discourse, I wish to perform the melancholy duty of paying my tribute of friendship and respect to the memory of the late Dr. Banikanta Kakati, in whose honour the University of Gauhati and the people of Assam have established this lectureship, of which I have the honour of having been appointed the inaugurator. Banikanta Kakati, whose sudden and untimely passing away at the comparatively early age of 58 in November 1952 we all mourn, was a scholar and educationist of whom not only Assam but the whole of India is proud, and he has a place in the front rank of linguisticians and investigators of history and culture who have added lustre to Indian scholarship of the present day. Because of his significant contributions, his name will always be held in respect along with his works wherever people take an interest in the languages and culture and religion in India. He did not attain to a hoary old age, and if he had joined the majority in the fulness of his years and after greater achievements which were promised by the works he has left, it would not have been a matter of such keen regret among his relations, friends, fellow-workers and admirers as this taking him away from the very useful sphere of work in which he was manifesting the full maturity of his mind and his powers, leaving hardly any one as distinguished as himself, to carry on the work he had commenced, at least for sometime to come, until capable successors come forward.

A quiet and serious student, a capable and efficient teacher who could inspire his own students with enthusiasm for linguistic and literary pursuits, a sincere lover of the good and the true and the beautiful, Banikanta was the person to attract the love and admiring homage of all and sundry. His loss has been felt as much as a personal as a national one by all who had come to know him or to have even a slight contact with him. His easily understood popularity with his own students and colleagues and the people of Assam is fully borne out by the praiseworthy expedition with which arrangements have been made to perpetuate his memory in the University which he served and the good name of which for scholarship (although it is a very young institution as a University) he enhanced. And this is also for the credit of the people of Assam, too,—the promptitude with which they have come forward to honour one of the greatest sons of the State in a manner which is quite suitable to keep green the memory of the services he performed for his people and his country.

Banikanta Kakati I came to know for the first time nearly 32 years ago, when he was in Calcutta preparing for his M. A. examination in English in the University of Calcutta, in which he appeared in 1923 and stood first with a first class in the linguistic Group (B). He had already taken his M.A. in the literary Group (A) in 1918. I had just then returned from Europe, after my three years' stay and study there, in November 1922, and so far as I remember, Banikanta was not a regular student in the few classes I still took in English (Old English and History of the English Language). But I have a vague recollection that he, like an occasional student in B Group like himself, would come to my house from time to time for help and guidance as a private candidate—which I generally gladly rendered if I found the student keen and industrious. This made me know him a little more intimately than most of my regular students

whom I met only in the class room, and I began to appreciate the steady qualities and the seriousness of Banikanta. After taking his M.A. in 1918 he had gone back to Assam, and he was appointed Professor of English in one of the premier colleges affiliated to the University of Calcutta—Cotton College of Gauhati in Assam. He would generally make it his business to see me when he would come to Calcutta in connexion with his duties as an Examiner in English of the University. My *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language* was published in 1926, and after that—I cannot remember when it was exactly—he gradually formed the idea of bringing out a similar work on the history of his own mother-tongue, Assamese. In a way, Banikanta and myself were similarly situated—both of us were drawn to do something for our mother-tongues impelled by the impetus we received from our study of the History of the English Language and Germanic Linguistics. I was very happy to find in him a fellow-worker whose explanation of the problem of Assamese by the new light he could alone throw on the subject as an Assamese-speaker with proper linguistic equipment was bound to be of help for Bengali and Oriya, sister-languages of Assamese. Banikanta has made a generous reference to my interest in his work in the Preface to his *Assamese, its Formation and Development*. It was certainly a labour of love for me. When his thesis was first presented, the award of the doctorate was withheld as the other examiners (both of them no longer in the land of the living) were in my opinion a little too exacting, but Professor Jules Bloch of Paris, who was my *Guru,* readily agreed on my request to assist Banikanta with his detailed criticisms and corrections ; and this, as Banikanta himself gratefully acknowledged, certainly improved his book considerably. In 1935, the examiners were unanimous in awarding him the doctorate, but it was only in 1941 that his work could be published.

The total output of Banikanta's linguistic and literary

work is not very extensive, but it is full of useful material and penetrating exposition. He wrote a short English work on Sankaradeva, the great apostle of Assam in the 15th-16th centuries, and two very valuable studies, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya* (1948) and *Visnuite Myths and Legends* (published posthumously in 1952), besides a few research articles in English, editions of Early Assamese texts, and some articles in Assamese. These give no glimpses of the mind of the man, who was essentially one of "Sweetness and Light",—a scholar who was, above all, rigidly intellectual in his approach to problems relating to history and culture (including religion) and at the same time possessed a deep vein of idealism and faith.

Such men are rare in any country or community. Assam and India were fortunate in having Banikanta Kakati with his strong intellect and his high idealism, and it will be difficult to find any one in his sphere to take his place. But he has left, for the young scholars of Assam particularly, his shining example which his own works will never allow to grow dim ; and so long as the Assamese language will live and will be studied, future generations will have to make their obeisance to the memory of the first great linguistic scholar of Assam who won the Assamese language for scientific linguistics.

1. *Assam, the Extreme Corner of the Vast Country of India*

Assam forms a part of the great land of India which could not be always in the limelight because of its geographical position in an extreme corner of a vast country—the North-East. It had retained its independence in its various sections right down to 1826 when it came under British protection (Assam proper or the Valley of the Brahmaputra, besides Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Cachar and Manipur – the

"far east" of Assam came under the British later, viz. Sadiya in 1842, and then one after the other the Duars, the Northern Frontier Tracts, the Naga Hills, the Garo Hills, and finally the Lushai Hills as late as 1892). All these Eastern Frontier Tracts were consolidated into the province of Assam in 1898. The echoes of happenings in Assam, concerned as they were with the backward aboriginal peoples of North-Eastern India mostly, did not reach other parts of India ; and Assam remained in the background which her geographical position seemed to condemn her to.

Yet Assam was never wholly isolated from the rest of India, and at times Assam loomed large in Indian History and Politics, particularly in connexion with the affairs of Eastern India, At the present moment, in an independent India, Assam, or rather, a part of it which is proposed to be detached from it for administrative convenience as a North-Eastern Frontier Agency, has acquired a special importance in the political set-up of India, with Tibet, Burma and Communist China touching the territory of India through Assam. In ancient and early medieval times, the history of Assam was intimately connected with that of Bengal. In present-day India, Assam has come to her own as an important State within the Union of India, and son and daughters of Assam are now taking their due share in carrying on the affairs of India both in Assam and from the centre in New Delhi.

2. *Assam, a Frotier State*

The geographical situation of Assam as a frontier state of India has given to the province its special position and importance. This is now being realised by the Central Government of India in New Delhi. The importance of the North-Western Frontier Province adjoining Afghanistan and the ever-expanding Empire of Russia during British times has now been eclipsed in Republican India by the importance

of Assam and the North-Eastern Frontier Areas. Certain Tibeto-Burman and other Sino-Tibetan-speaking tribes ("Mongoloids") have formed parts of the settled population of Assam since time immemorial, and they have come within the orbit of Indian civilisation at a fairly early age ; and now they form part of the Indian body-politic. Although remotely connected with the Mongoloid peoples of Burma, Tibet and China, they have acquired their special niches in the hall of Indian *penplades* and have been long separated from Tibet, China and Burma. The Nagas belong to India as much as the Mishmis, the Miris, the Daflas, the Akas and the Abors, peoples who had relations with the ruling houses of the Brahmaputra Valley and with no other advanced state by virtue of their geographical situation. The Patkai Range and the Namkin Range in the extreme east of Assam form natural boundaries between India on the one hand and Burma and China on the other; and the lower reaches of the Dihang (the Tsangpo of Tibet), the Sesiri, the Dibang and the Luhit which combine to form the Brahmaputra of India are now within Indian territory. The Kuki-Chin tribes of Manipur became part of Hindu India at an unknown epoch, probably at least a thousand years from now. Assam and Nepal were the areas where large bodies of Sino-Tibetan-speaking peoples—loosely called Mongoloids by Europeans and known to Sanskrit-using ancient Indians as *Kirātas*, merged into an ever-expanding Hindu body-politic or Indian nation which took up its characteristic *cachet* with its Sanskritic speech and the Hindu or mixed Aryan-non-Aryan view of life. It is now the lot of Assam to act as India's sentinel against any aggression from the East and the North-East, where the basic Mongoloid character of large masses of the people (although they have become in some cases wholly Indianised) would appear to afford temptation and wistful thinking in some quarters for territorial expansion at the expense of India which would seek the support of this racial affinity—an affinity, which however has been very noticeably

modified under the impact of the Indian spirit and atmosphere.

3. *The North-Western and the North-Eastern Frotiers of India*

There is a noteworthy agreement, geographically and in the peculiar character of the inhabitants of these areas, between the North-West Frontier of Undivided India and the Indian North-East Frontier of Assam. Both are mountainous regions forming natural walls separating India from adjacent lands. There are great rivers in both, some of which have their sources in Tibet (e.g. the Indus and the Satlaj, and the Brahmaputra), but which have always had a tremendous importance for India, economic and cultural. The Indus and its tributaries flow mostly from North to South, excepting some small tributaries from Afghanistan and Baluchistan like the Kabul, the Kurram, the Gomal and the rest which flow from the West to the East ; while the mighty Brahmaputra passes in its westerly course all through the valley of Assam before debouching to the South at the West of the Garo Hills, and all its tributaries flow either North to South, or South to North. These rivers brought the gift of fertility and civilisation to their respective basins ; and the plain land through which the Brahmaputra flows forms part of the great Indian riverain plain extending from the East of Afghanistan to the West of Northern Burma and embracing the valleys of the three great rivers of India : the Indus with its tributaries, the Ganges with its tributaries and branches, and the Brahmaputra. The inaccessible mountain regions of the West isolated peoples, mostly of Aryan language, from their kinsmen on both the Indian and the Iranian sides—the Dardic or Khas tribes of the extreme North-West, like the Kho-war or Kafir peoples, and the Shinas, as well as the Hunza-Nagar Burushaskis, who are of unknown linguistic affinity. The North-West formed the

main highway for peoples of the West who have pushed into India from time immemorial—the Asianic and Mediterranean people and the Palestinian invaders who later are believed to have become the Dravidian and the *Nishāda* or Austric peoples of India, and the Aryan speakers—who came in prehistoric times,—in addition to the Negroids who were the first immigrant people in India coming from Africa via Arabia and the coast-lands of Iran and Baluchistan into India in their eolithic stage of culture. Subsequently in historic times most of India's foreign invaders came by way of the West—the problematical Assyrio-Babylonians, possible European Indo-Europeans like the proto-Greeks, likely Elamites (who are believed by some to have started the ancient Sisunaga dynasty of Magadha), the Old Persians who built up the great Achæmenian empire, the Greeks and Macedonians, the Sakas and Kushanas, the Pahlavas or Parthians and the Culikas or Sogdians, the Hunas and the Turushkas or Turks, the Arabs, then fresh groups of Turks accompanied by the Pathans or Afghans and Persians, and finally, further groups of Turks under Babar, and of Persians and Afghans under Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abadali. From time to time, small groups of Indians also went out to the West through the North-West frontier—the Indian exiles from Gandhara, who, according to one tradition preserved by the Chinese, went out and founded the town of *Godana* or *Kustana* (=*Khotan*) in the 3rd century B.C., and other Indians who subsequently went from the same area and settled to the East of Khotan and formed a flourishing Indian colony there (the kingdom of *Kroraina* or *Shan-Shan*), using their language which is found in documents of the third century A.D. preserved at Niya and elsewhere. The Gypsis of Eastern Asia and Europe are another people from the North-West of India who spread out to the west probably in the 3rd century B.C., and then in the course of the succeeding centuries branched out all over Europe from Greece and the East European States. On the whole, the

North-West Frontier and the Punjab had to bear the brunt of all foreign incursions from the West throughout the succeeding centuries.

4. *Assam—the Reservoir of Kirāta or Mongoloid Peoples in India*

The prehistoric stage of Indian history continued longer in the Eastern Frontier including Assam ; and although in the unknown centuries before sober and documented history started some centuries after the Christian era for Assam, there were movements of peoples along the Eastern Frontier we do not know much about them. Different branches of the great Sino-Tibetan speaking people which had their *nidus* near the head-waters of the Yang-tsze-Kiang and the Hoang-Ho rivers, to the West of China, pushed South and West, probably from 2000 B.C. onwards, and tribes of these infiltrated into India mostly along the western course of the Brahmaputra. The great Bodo tribe would appear to have been established over the valley of the Brahmaputra fairly early, and to have extended into North and East Bengal and into North Bihar. The North Assam tribes of the Abors and Akas, Daflas and Miris, and Mishmis appear to have come later, and to have established themselves in the mountains to the North of the Brahmaputra plains already in occupation of the Bodos, and by some Austric and possibly also Dravidian tribes which preceded the Mongoloid Bodos in this tract—Bodo and Austric and Dravidian with Aryan speaking elements from Bengal and Bihar and with the Siamese-Chinese section of the Mongoloids in their Thai tribe of the Ahoms finally becoming transformed to the Aryan Assamese-speaking masses of the valley. Probably preceding the Bodos were the various Himalayan tribes of Sino-Tibetans who spread into Nepal and were to be found as far west as the East Panjab plains, and some of whom may have actually settled in the Sub-Himalayan tract in the Ganges valley :

and there is evidence of their having penetrated as far south as Sindh on the one hand and Bastar State and Orissa on the other. These Himalayan tribes, connected with whom are the present-day Manchat, Ranglo, Bunan, Kanash and Kanawaris in the Western Himalayas, Rangkas, Darmiya, Byangsi and Chaudangsi in the Central Himalayas, and the Vayu, Khambu, Yakha, Jimdar, Limbu and Dhimal in the Eastern Himalayas, were certainly the earliest group to come into India from the East and penetrate so far to the West ; for they, in addition, were profoundly modified in their language by Austric peoples with whom they had to come into contact, in the plains of North India. The other Himalayan peoples like the Magars, the Gurungs, the Newars, the Lepchas, the Murmis, etc., either came from Tibet, or by the eastern route along the Brahmaputra ; but in any case they would appear to have been later than the others mentioned above.

5. *Prehistoric and Historic Tribal Movements in Assam*

These prehistoric movements are uncertain, but in historical times we have full accounts of the Ahoms, a Shan tribe who came into Assam in 1228 and gave to the Brahmaputra Valley its ruling race for six centuries, this ruling race, which gave the province or state its present names of *Aham* or *Asam* (Assam), being itself absorbed into their Hinduised or Hindu and Assamese-speaking subjects towards the end of this long periond. Finally, we have the incursions of some Kuki-Chin tribes in the regions to the South of Assam, who were largely Hinduised in Manipur and in Tipperah States ; and then we have to consider the Burmese invasions, with their definite modernistic ideas of political expansion and conquest, during the first quarter of the 19th century, and not merely with a primitive *Wanderlust* of home-seeking movement of people harassed by other tribes or finding

its life difficult or impossible in its old *milieu*.

Assam has thus to meet all the tribal movements from the East, involving the advent into India of Tibeto-Chinese speaking Mongoloids; and it was in Assam primarily that this great element in the formation of the Indian people became largely Indianised—particularly in the Brahmaputra valley. Assam with Nepal helped very largely in the absorption of this Kirāta element in the formation of the North-Indian (Hindu) people. This can be looked upon as Assam's great contribution to the Synthesis of Cultures and Fusion of Races that took place in India—a synthesis which had started in prehistoric times when two distinct races found that they were to reside together in the same country—the Austric and the Mongoloid, the Dravidian and the Austric, and the Dravidian and the Mongoloid. This synthesis took a definite shape, and its character and line of movement was fixed forever, when, as F. W. Thomas has noted it, the *Indian Man* as the result of the fusion of the Aryan and Dravidian, Mongoloid and Austric came into being at the end of the Vedic period (i.e. by 1000 B.C.).

6. *Racial and Cultural Synthesis in India and Assam*

The Synthesis that was given a great impetus and came to be furnished with an ideal and an aim after the Aryans arrived at the Indian scene, gradually developed its own special philosophy and ethics (the latter represented by the moral code and the idea of *Ahimsā* or non-injury as advocated by the Buddhists and the Jains, and the former, in so far as it took cognisance of an Unseen Reality behind Life, expressed itself in the terms of the Vedānta with its different schools and the Mahāyāna) and its world of myth and cosmogony, legend and history which was a loosely gathered selection of materials from the traditions of the different races, to which a coherence was attempted to be given, and the

Indian *Purāṇas* and partly the epics of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* emerged from this attempt. The whole of India was brought within the pale of Puranic geography (including that of the *Mahābhārata*), and Assam naturally was no exception to it. The Brahmaputra, curiously enough, was not recognised as one of the seven sacred rivers of India (Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu or the Indus, and Kaveri), but the land of Assam as *Prāg-jyotiṣa* or *Kāmarūpa* was early (probably sometime during the second half of the 1st millennium A.D.) recognised as a centre of both Buddhist and Brahmanical (Śākta) Tantricism ; and this special character of Kāmarūpa or Prāgjyotiṣa within the holy land of India has been accepted by Hindu sentiment to our day.

7. *Incorporation of Assam as an Integral Part of India in the Purāṇas and Tantras*

The Purāṇa legend of the passing away of Satī, the wife of Śiva at the sacrifice performed by her father Daksha, and Śiva's frenzy of grief in carrying Satī's body and refusing to part with it, until Vishnu with his discus cut the body into 51 parts which fell in different parts of India which came to be venerated as the 51 *pīṭhas* or "holy seats or sees", took, in the opinion of Dines Chandra Sarkar (e.g. the *Śākta Pīṭhas*, JRASB., Letters, XIV, No. 1, 1948), its final shape in Bengal by 1700 A.D. But the Kāmākhyā shrine in Kāmarūpa had become already established as an important centre of Tantric worship (both Buddhist and Hinduistic), according to the *Hevajra Tantra* (8th century A.D.) and the *Kālikā Purāṇa* (earlier than 1000 A.D.). And the *Kālikā Purāṇa* and the *Yoginī Tantra* (which latter was probably composed in Assam, as a later work, certainly composed or compiled after 1000 A.D., and probably later still) already extol Assam as a land where Śākta Tantricism was fully established. The temple of the Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā near Gauhati in

Assam could only have come into prominence in Assam and Eastern India and then in the rest of India after its site came to be recognised as a most holy *pīṭha* where the pudendum from the body of Satī cut into pieces by Vishnu's discus had fallen ; and this led to the spot being called the *Yoni-pīṭha ;* and it became a great place of pilgrimage for Hindu India, after the presnt temple, certainly the most beautiful and complete specimen of medieval Hindu temple architecture in Assam, was built by King Naranārāyaṇa of Kāmarūpa and Koch Bihār and his brother in 1563 and its religious service was organised by Śākta Brahmans from Navadwīp in Bengal. But the Hindu and Purānic traditions that developed or were established in Assam from the period of the first Aryanisation of Assam and the settlement of Brahmans there, which may well go back to the second half or even the first half of first millennium B.C., linked up Assam with the Aryandom of North India, even though not as belonging to the Aryan pale (as we have this Aryan pale mentioned in detail in the *Brāhmaṇa* texts and in early Buddhist tradition of c. 700-500 B.C.), but as a vassal or friendly land of Kirāta or Mongoloid peoples the upper classes of which had become or were becoming Aryanised.

8. *The Mahābhārata and Assam*

In ancient Greece, the *Catalogue of Ships* in the Second Book of the *Iliad* has had its place in the unification of a Greater Greece during the classical period, three hundred years after the time of Homer and his group who gave to ancient Greece its national epic. The occurrence of its name in the list of states in this Book of the *Iliad* which participated in the sending of a pan-Hellenic expedition against the city of Troy by contributing ships and men was regaded as a proof for that state of having formed a part of Hellas from the earliest times of which the ancient Greeks retained a memory, and it was certainly a matter of prestige

for a state to have formed from this testimony of the *Iliad* a member of the Greek comity of states from hoary antiquity. So too in India, the occurrence of the name of a Hindu state in the *Mahābhārata* (and failing that in the *Purāṇas*) was tacitly accepted as a proof of that state having formed a part of Hindudom or Aryandom from very high antiquity. Hindu tradition based on calculation on insufficient data during the second half of the 1st millennium A. D. has taken the *Mahābhārata* battle to times round about 3100 B.C.; but a sober estimate would suggest bringing the historic kernel of this epoch-making event in ancient India to about 950 B.C., and the *Mahābhārata*, which started as a series of ballads recounting the *Jaya* or "Triumph" of the Pāṇḍavas, gradually became elaborated into a great epic in Sanskrit by 500 B.C. and went on expanding by the addition of all sorts of new materials for the greater part of a millennium, until it attained by 400 A.D., as is generally surmised to something like its present huge dimensions as a vast poem of 1,00,000 verses or 2,00,000 lines. In two sections of the *Mahābhārata*, in the *Sabhā-parvan* (Book II) and in the *Udyoga-parvan* (Book V) are given lists of states in India which had come within the world of the finished *Mahābhārata*. In the *Sabhā-parvan*, it is narrated that the Pāndava brothers from their capital at Indraprastha (modern Delhi) issued with their armies to conquer the kings and peoples of the North and the South, of the East and the West, to levy tribute for them to celebrate a great sacrifice and a gathering of kings and sages with much feasting which they wanted to celebrate. Names of the various states, peoples and rulers who were conquered and who were invited to the feast by the Pāṇḍavas are given here, and these names, as well as these and other names in another list in the *Udyoga-parvan* where the various nations and kings who took sides with the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas for the Kurukshetra battle, form a charter for antiquity and high prestige for these various peoples and states in Hindu history.

We find mention of Assam as *Prāgjyotiṣa* (the earlier of its two Sanskrit names, the other being *Kāmarūpa*) in both these books of the *Mahābhārata.* There is a considerable amount of positive information about Assam—its people, its products and its king, in the *Sabhā-parvan,* and I can do no better than to quote from the very valuable study of this section of the *Mahābhārata-Sabhā-parvan* by Dr. Moti Chandra (*Geographical and Economic Studies in the Mahābhārata Upāyana Parva,* the U. P. Historical Society, Lucknow, 1945) :

Prāgjyotiṣa : M. B. II, 47, 12-14. In some passages, Prāgjyotiṣa is called a Mleccha kingdom (M. B. II, 47, 12) ruled over by Bhagadatta who is spoken with respect. Prāgjyotiṣa was placed in the north (M. B. II, 23, 19), but was also considered to be in the east, (Mārkandeya Purāṇa VII, 44). There must have been mountains near his kingdom as it is called Sailālaya (Strīparva XXIII, 644). Bhagadatta recruited his troops (M. B. II, 23, 19) from Kirātas, Cīnas, and the soldiers who dwelt on the sea-coast. He is said to have lived with the confederacy of the kings on the Bay of Bengal (M. B. V, 4, 11). The country of Prāgjyotiṣa is represented by Assam, and probably some part of North Bengal.

Bhagadatta, the King of Assam, presented to Yudiṣṭhira fleet horses (M.B. II, 47, 13), and vessels made of *aśmasāra* (which is a semi-precious stone, either amethyst, or jade or jadeite).....,

Bhagadatta's other presents were made of swords with handles made of pure ivory (*śuddha-danta-tsarūn asīn*) (M.B. II, 47, 14). Sword handles (*tsaravaḥ*) made of the horns of rhinoceros, buffaloes, the elephant tusks and bamboo roots or wood were common in Kauṭilya's time (*Artha-śāstra,* p. 111). Prāgjyotiṣa could present ivory handles—as the kingdom was the home of elephants in ancient times.....If the jadeite came in the shape of vessels, then their manufacture should be attributed to the Chinese.....

9. *Assam, the Eastern Gateway for the Passage of Peoples, Commodities and Ideas between China and India*

There is evidence that Assam formed a highway not only for trade but also for the exchange of ideas between India and Burma and South-West China (Szechuan and Yunnan) from at least the closing centuries of the first mil-

lennium B.C. The Sanskrit name for China, *Cīna,* is believed to have been derived from the name of the Ts'in dynasty which came into power in China from 221 B.C., and the name would appear to have come to India through Assam.

The Kirāta or Mongoloid people were certainly very well known to the Vedic Aryans, and we find mention of them in the *Yajur* and *Atharva Vedas.* They appear to have started to come within the Hindu pale from the late Vedic period, and Bhagadatta with his Kirāta and Cīna or Chinese hosts participated in the *Mahābhārata* battle as an ally of the Kauravas. He fought from an elephant, and was killed by Bhīma, the Pāṇḍava hero. All this would suggest that the King of Prāgjyotiṣa featured in the *Mahābhārata* in probably its first draft as an epic—so important is Bhagadatta. Traditions of Hindu ruling houses in Burma suggest the migration by land route through Assam into Burma among the Mons, the Pyus and the Burmese even before the middle of the 1st millennium B. C. (I have discussed this story of the bringing of the Kirāta tribes within the orbit of the mixed Aryan-non-Aryan culture of North India in my monograph, the *Kirāta-jana-kṛti,* Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1951).

10. *Bhagadatta of Prāgjyotiṣa : Aryanisation of Assam*

In Assam's relation with the rest of India, Bhagadatta forms a significant symbol, even though he might be purely legendary. He is symbolical of a Kirāta or Mongoloid chief who came within the fold of the Brahmanical world as it was developing in the *Madhyadeśa* or the Midland (corresponding to present-day Western Uttara Pradeśa and Eastern Punjab) and in the *Udīcya* or Northern Punjab round about 1000 B.C., the closing part of the Vedic age. As has generally happened all over non-Aryan India, the acceptance of the composite religion and culture of Gangetic India and its

way of life by the ruling classes brought in an easy and inevitable merging of the entire non-Aryan tribe or people within the ever-expanding Brahmanical Hindu world which had the Aryan language Sanskrit as its vehicle. In the process of the "Sanskritisation", as it might be called, place-names in non-Aryan territories would normally be translated into Sanskrit, or Sankritised. Brahmaputra and Lauhitya, names of the great rivers of Assam. and Prāgjyotiṣa and Kāmarūpa, names of the province, are in all likelihood approximations to Sanskrit of pre-Aryan names. Banikanta Kakati suggested that *Prāgjyotiṣa* might be a Sanskritisation of a possible Austric group of words like *pau* (= hill) + *ger* (= hill) + *jo* (= high) + *tic* (long) = "(land of) high and long mountains", and *Kāmarūpa* and *Kāmākhyā* he sought to connect with an Austric basic word meaning "a grave, a corpse", the place-names being connected with the legend found in the *Purāṇa* of Satī's dead body being cut up and a part of it falling in Kāmākhyā hill in Kāmarūpa. *Lauhitya* is of course the Tibeto-Burman *Luhit*, the meaning of which is lost ; and Bishnu Rabha has proposed to find in the name *Brahmaputra* a Bodo *bhullam-buthur* meaning "making a gurgling noise". Thus, place-names both of Austric and Mongoloid origin can be found behind the current Sanskrit ones.

11. *The Great Boḍo People of Assam : the Offspring of the Son of Vishnu and Mother Earth*

The Kirāta people of Assam, before the coming into Assam of their kinsmen the Thai or Shan Ahom tribe from North Burma in 1228, judging from the widely scattered groups of the Boḍo people all over the State, appear to have been of the great Tibeto-Burman tribe of the Boḍos who still number nearly a million as pure Boḍo speakers unassimilated among the Aryan-(Assamese and Bengali) speaking people of the Assam plains. These Boḍos were in all likelihood

the dominant people of the Assam valley and the adjacent hills, and had spread also all over North Bengal and East Bengal, and possibly also North Bihar; and there were living among them, or beside them, Austric Khasi and other tribes (Nishādas) and also Dravidian speakers. The ruling family would (as would be quite natural when the caste system was not so rigid) be given by the Brahman missionaries (whose genius for synthesis and assimilation we have to thank for the expansion of Hindu religion and culture all over India, and even beyond India) the status of Kshatriyas by finding a fictitious descent for them from some hero of Hindu legend or by connecting their origin to some great divinity of Brahmanism. From very early—possibly pre-Christian—times, it was accepted that the ruling house of Prāgjyotiṣa and Kāmarūpa was descended from Vishnu in his Boar incarnation by the Earth-goddess. The son of Vishnu and the Earth Goddess was Naraka Asura, and Bhagadatta was Naraka's son. This tradition the Assam ruling houses never forgot through the centuries; and through the *Purāṇas*, this tradtion became a great link with the rest of Hindu India.

12. *The Children of Naraka in History and Epigraphy in Assam and in Kashmir*

Apart from the mention of Prāgjyotiṣa in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Harivaṃśa*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Viṣṇu* and other *Purāṇas*, the earliest epigraphic reference to Assam (Kāmarūpa) is in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta (c. 350 A.D.). Here with Samataṭa and Davāka (which are in East Bengal) and Nepal and other states *Kāmarūpa* is mentioned as a *pratyanta* or frontier state outside the Gupta empire, but evidently in friendly and subordinate relationship with it. Kālidāsa also mentions Prāgjyotiṣa and Kāmarūpa as a state which was conquered by Raghu. By the early centuries of the Christian era, Assam as Prāgjyotiṣa and Kāmarūpa had become definitely a part

of Hindu India, although the masses of its people were probably still Boḍo-speaking, as in 16th century North Bengal among the Koches. The fame of the dynasty of Naraka, originating from Vishnu and the Earth Goddess themselves, also spread over Hindu India.

A most interesting, and in a way quite unexpected evidence of the influence of at least the ruling family of Assam as descended from Naraka and Bhagadatta has been found from distant Gilgit in Kashmir, at the other end of India. An inscription in Sanskrit prose in characters going back to the middle of the 7th century A.D. (a form of proto-Śāradā script) has been found on a rock within the territory of Gilgit (now in Pakistan occupation) which mentions a king of the North-Eestern Frontier tract whose titles are given as *Parama-Bhaṭṭāraka-Mahārājādhirājā-Parameśvara Paṭola-deva-Ṣāhi-Śrī-Nava-Surendrāditya-nandi-deva* who is described as *Śri-Bhagadatta-Vaṃsa-Sambhūta* or "born of the line of Śrī Bhagadatta". (This inscription is now being edited by my friend Dr. Niranjan Prasad Chakravarti, retired Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India, and I am indebted to him for his great kindness in permitting me to use it in the present context). There was a well-known Hindu *Ṣāhi* dynasty ruling in Kabul several centuries later, and names of some other *Ṣāhi* kings have also been found very near to the time of this ruler *Śrī-Nava-Surendrāditya-nandi-deva,* about whom nothing else is known. He must have been a puissant ruler, and the inscription describes the founding of a town named *Makarapura* by his faithful vassal Makarsiṃha, *Sarāṅgha* of *Giligitta* or Gilgit, and mention has been made in this inscription of a district called *Huṇesara* (which may be the modern *Hunża*) and a village *Anhabhūṇa,* which has not been identified. The presence of a dynasty of kings claiming descent from Bhagadatta, evidently of Assam, is exceedingly intriguing.

13. *North-Eastern India and North-Western India*

Connexion between the extreme ends of Himalayan India was not an uncommon thing, and Vapyaṭa, the father of Gopāla, the founder of the great Pāla dynasty of Bengal and Bihar, came into the East from North-West Panjab. According to the Kashmir chronicle of the *Rāja-taraṅginī*, a king of Gauḍa or West Bengal of unknown name was taken as a prisoner into Kashmir where he was murdered through the treachery of King Lalitāditya Muktāpīḍa who had defeated and evidently captured the former in an expedition to Eastern India (c. 740) ; and on receiving this news, the personal followers of this unnamed Gauḍa king went all the way from Bengal to take revenge, and the dark-skinned Gauḍas were surrounded in the temple of Parihāsa-Keśava where they died fighting, being killed to a man after performing prodigies of valour (*Rāja-taraṅginī*, IV, 323 ff). There is mention of a North Bengal dynasty of Kings of the Kamboja line in a 10th century inscription from Dinajpur, and I have sought to explain this word *Kamboja* as a Sanskritisation of the Boḍo tribal name of *Ko'ca* or *Koṃca* (<* *Kamoca*), but we have at the same time to take note of a possible connexion with the *Kambo* Kshatriya tribe of the North-Western frontier tract of India which had in ancient times the name of *Kamboja* or *Kambuja* (to the west of Peshawar) from pre-Christian times. The mystery of this Bhagadatta dynasty is rather baffling, and it may be just possible that this dynasty was founded by some unknown scion of the Assam royal house who found himself there sometime before 650 A.D. It was during this period that one Assam ruler, the greatest after the legendary Bhagadatta, had established himself as the master of what may be called an Eastern empire, and he had close friendly relations with Harshavardhana, the acknowledged sovereign of the greater part of North India in his time. This was Bhāskara-varman, who had made Assam one of the most advanced kingdoms

of India in his day, and was in full diplomatic relationship with China also.

14. *Seventh Century A.D. : Great Period for India and Assam : Bhāskara-varman*

The 7th century after Christ was a glorious epoch for both India and Assam, particularly during the first half of it. It was the period when Harsha-vardhana, one of the most powerful and enlightened rulers of India, was emperor in Northern India, and in Assam ruled King Bhāskara-varman Kumāra. They were both worthy contemporaries of Hiuen Ts'ang, whom both of them honoured as a scholar of international significance in Asia.

We obtain a good deal of information about Bhāskara-varman from his own inscriptions, the Dubi and Nidhanpur (Sylhet) copper plate grants, from the Sanskrit romantic biography of Harsha-vardhana by Bāṇa-bhaṭṭa (the *Harṣa-carita*), and from notices of him left by the Chinese sources. He was the most powerful king of Eastern India, and with his ally and suzerain Harsha he was able to crush Śaśāṅka, king of Gauḍa or West Bengal, and considerable portions of Śaśāṅka's territory then formed part of his empire. He had the political sagacity to link himself up with the greatest contemporary ruler of North India, Harshavardhana Śilāditya of Thāneśwar and Kanauj, whose friendship he obtained, being more an ally and comrade than vassal; and this alliance with Harsha-vardhana was in all likelihood instrumental in obtaining for him an extension of his kingdom – he ruled not only over Western and Northern Assam (the Brahmaputra valley), but also probably over the Surma valley (Sylhet, where an inscription of his has been found), and he was able to annex Karṇa-suvarṇa in West Bengal. In his time, before the days of Nara-nārāyaṇa, the Koch king of North Bengal and Assam, Assam's dominion extended over the greater part

of Bengal. A Hinduised Indo-Mongoloid empire was thus achieved during the middle of the 7th century A. D.

15. *Assam—A Highway between India and China*

Bhāskara-varman was not a mere provincial ruler of a distant frontier kingdom, in North-Eastern India. In 644 A.D. he visited Harsha-vardhana in his own realm in North India, and fully participated in the culture and intellectual life of Hindu India of his time. He was a Brahmanical Hindu himself, but he had his friend and patron Harsha-vardhana's broadness of outlook. He was host to Hiuen Ts'ang whom he invited to his court in Kāmarūpa, when the latter was staying and studying in Nālandā. Hiuen Ts'ang accepted this invitation, and came to Kāmarūpa, and the description he has left of the place is the oldest that we have of Assam from any writer, Indian or foreign, barring references in the *Mahābhārata*. Hiuen Ts'ang by mistake described Bhāskara-varman as a Brāhman, but he was just a neo-Kshatriya, a member of a Hinduised Mleccha of non-Hindu-Indo-Mongoloid family which had been accepted within the fold of Hindu orthodoxy at least several generations before. The Mongoloid character of the people of the country is clearly noted by the Chinese writer: "the men are of small stature and their complexion, a dark yellow: their language differs a little from that of Mid-India" (this differing "a little" in Hiuen Ts'ang's parlance meant, however, really differing entirely: see *Origin and Development of the Bengali Language*, I, pp. 77-79). Hiuen Ts'ang knew that the eastern frontiers of Bhāskara-varman's kingdom were adjacent to the south-eastern frontiers of China. Communication between China and India (Assam) through the wild mountainous regions between the two countries was exceedingly difficult, being two months' march through pestilential jungles and high mountains, as Hiuen Ts'ang has noted. But it nevertheless did exist, and for centuries before the

days of both Hiuen Ts'ang and Bhāskara-varman, as we know from the Chinese soldier-explorer in Central Asia in the 2nd century B.C., Chang K'ien, and from the Greek geographers and sailors from the 1st century A.D. (e.g. *the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea,* and the Geography of Ptolemy).

After 648 A.D., the Chinese, making the allied State of Nepal their base, invaded India to avenge the insult done to the Chinese representatives who came to Harshavardhana's court after Harsha had died, and they defeated and captured the faithless minister of Harsha who had usurped his master's throne and treated with scant courtesy the envoys from China. In this conflict, Bhāskara-varman aided the Chinese with supplies of cattle, horses and accoutrements. Bhāskara was quite a wide-awake ruler, with an intelligent, international outlook in both politics and culture, which was rather rare in those days in all lands, and particularly in India. We may assume that as the ruler of a frontier state in India, adjoining areas within the purview of China, he encouraged Sino-Indian co-operation in commerce and culture. T'ang China and Sassanian Persia were the only great states in Asia with which India had direct contact in those days, and the direct contact with China was effected by the land route only through Assam. There was direct contact by the sea-route from Tāmralipti in Bengal and from the harbours in the Kalinga country and the Tamil land, Hiuen Ts'ang himself had come from China by a round-about route through Central Asia. Evidently the Mongoloid kinship of the people of Assam with that of China and of the intermediate lands served as a link.

16. *Sino-Indian Culture Contacts through Assam*

From Chinese sources, we find interesting side-lights about Sino-Indian culture contacts through Assam and about

the enlightened curiosity of the Indo-Mongoloid ruler of Assam Bhāskara-varman in matters relating to Chinese thought. In 619 A.D , a Chinese prince, a son of the T'ang emperor Kao-tsu, had defeated some rebels against "the Son of Heaven", the Chinese emperor. A song was composed in celebration of the event, and in praise of the emperor of China. This song travelled to India (it was probably the melody only which came to India—the Chinese words could possibly not have come, but a translation of the song in some Tibeto-Burman language, it may be Old Boḍo, might have also been current). Bhāskara-varman had taken note of this Chinese song, which was popular with his people ; and when he saw Hiuen Ts'ang in 638 A.D. in his capital he, on the testimony of Hiuen Ts'ang, told him as follows : "At present in various states of India a song has been heard from some time called 'the music of the Conquests of Ts'in-wang (i.e. of the Prince of King of Ts'in)' or Mahācīna (i.e., China Proper). All his subjects having their moral and material wants cared for by this ruler sing the song of Ts'in-wang's conquests, and this fine song has long been known (in Kāmarūpa)." This narrative related by Hiuen Ts'ang shows how, in spite of the difficulties of communication between India and China in these days, a piece of music composed in China could find its way to India ; and it testifies to some sort of cultural connexion between the two countries.

Bhāskara-varman was also curious to have precise information about the philosophy of Lao-tzu. Before the advent of Buddhism in China, the highest and the most profound expression of the mind and soul of China in philosophy and mysticism was through the doctrines of Lao-tzu, who lived, as an elder contemporary of the other great philosopher of China, Confucius (K'ung-fu-tzu), about 600 B.C. Buddhism after its introduction into China was in close and generally sympathetic connexion with Taoism,

the philosophy of Lao-tzu, and it borrowed some of its technical terms from Taoism. Taoist and Buddhist teachers read each others' scriptures, and Taoism was reorganised as a church and as a popular religion on the lines of Buddhism. Taoism in its general outlook is like the Vedanta of the early Upanishads, and the basic work of Taoism, the *Tao-teh-king*, attributed to the sage Lao-tzu himself, is comparable to the earlier Upanishads of India. The philosophy centres round the conception of the Ultimate Reality behind Life and the Universe as the 'Way' (the word *Tao* meaning "way" in Chinese) which was like the Indian conception of the Unmanifest (*nir-guṇa*) and the Manifest (*sa-guṇa*) Brahman : "the Way", as a philosophical conception, lays stress on the inevitability of things in life as a manifestation of the inner principle of existence. The Chinese pilgrim-scholars who came to India and studied Indian philosophy must have been impressed by the agreements between Taoism and the Vedanta, and they were, many of them, well-versed in the literature of Taoism. Already about 520 A.D., over a hundred years before Hiuen Ts'ang and Bhāskara-varman, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Song-yun had discoursed on Lao-tzu and his great expositor Chuang-tzu (4th century B.C.) before the King of Udyana in the North-West Frontier of India. Bhāskara-varman, too, it may be reasonably presumed, was also acquainted with Lao-tzu's philosophy through Hiuen Ts'ang in 638 A.D., if not earlier through other sources. The curiosity of Bhāskara-varman was aroused, and when subsequently he met the Chinese envoys Wang Hiuan-tzu and Li Yi-piao who were sent to the court of Harsha-vardhana, he asked the latter to send him from China a Sanskrit translation of the *Tao-teh-king* and a portrait figure (picture or image) of Lao-tzu. Li Yi-piao had also spoken to Bhāskara about the doctrines of Lao-tzu and about the fact of his book not having come to India. Bhāskara-varman gave some valuable presents to the Chinese envoys, and sent to the Chinese emperor a map of

his kingdom (including, evidently, the wide tract of country in Eastern India, Assam and Bengal both comprised, to impress the Chinese emperor of his power and importance). The mention of this map of the territories of Bhāskara is noteworthy : it shows a certain high standard of intellectual attainment in an Indo-Mongoloid Assam of the 7th century A.D. Li Yi-piao returned to China and reported to the emperor about the request of Bhāskara-varman in connexion with the *Tao-teh-king* ; and the emperor at once appointed a board of Taoist and Buddhist scholars to prepare a Sanskrit translation of the Chinese work, Hiuen Ts'ang as the most erudite Sanskritist of China taking a leading part in the discussions which preceded the work of the translation. Chinese documents giving an account of a learned and friendly controversy which started around the proper Sanskrit rendering of the Chinese word *Tao* have been found, and translated into French by Paul Pallot (in the *T'oung Pao,* Leiden, Vol. XIII, 1912, pp. 381 ff.). Hiuen Ts'ang suggested that the proper word for *Tao* was *mārga* in Sanskrit, but the Taoist scholars, who were conversant with Buddhism, thought that *bodhi* was the correct word. (It seems that the proper word in Sanskrit to render the word Tao of Chinese—pronounced **Dhau* in Old Chinese—in both its literal and philosophical sense in *Rta—Rta* in the Vedas and the Upanishads indicating the Cosmic Order, the Law or Principle centering in Being, and this word appears to have indicated also "the Way", being derived from the root *r*, "to go"—*Rta* being "that through which things go or move".) It is not known whether the translation (which was completed apparently) was ever received by Bhāskara-varman. In any case, it is stimulating story of intellectual fellowship between China and India in the early medieval times, and it centres round an enlightened Indo-Mongoloid prince of Eastern India and Assam.

17. *The Advanced Civilisation of Assam in Its Indian Context in the 7th Century A.D.*

The material and intellectual culture of Assam in the days of Bhāskara-varman is brought out in a remarkable manner through the description by Bāṇa-bhaṭṭa of the presents sent by the king of Prāgjyotiṣa to his royal friend and sovereign lord Harsha-vardhana Śilāditya when the latter ascended the throne after the death of his elder brother Rājya-vardhana. These presents were brought to Harsha by Bhāskara's confidential messenger Haṃsa-vega. They included, in the first instance, a white silk umbrella, an ancient heir-loom in the family of Bhāskara, and there is an elaborate description in the *Harṣa-carita* of this wonderful creation of ancient Prāgjyotiṣa craftsmanship. The other presents were displayed and inspected by Harsha. To quote from the *Harṣa-carita* (in F. W. Thomas's translation, London, 1897, pp. 213 ff) : 'Among them were famous ornaments inherited from Bhagadatta and other renowned kings, ornaments which crimsoned the heavenly spaces with the light of the finest gems : the prime of sheeny crest-jewels : pearl necklaces which seemed the source of the Milk Ocean's whiteness : silken towels pure as the autumn moon's light, rolled up in baskets of variously coloured reeds : quantities of pearl, shell, sapphire, and other drinking vessels, embossed by skilful artists : loads of *Kārdaraṅga* leather bucklers with charming borders, bright gold-leaf work winding about them, and cases to preserve their colour : soft loincloths smooth as birch-bark : pillows of *Sāmūruka* (a kind of deer) leather, and other kinds of smooth figured textures ; cane stools with the bark yellow as the ear of the millet : volumes of fine writing with leaves made from aloe bark and of the hue of ripe pink cucumber ; luscious milky betel-nut fruit, hanging from its sprays and green as young *hārīta* doves : thick bamboo tubes containing mango sap and black aloes oil, and fenced round with sheaths of *kāpotikā* leaves,

tawny as an angry ape's cheeks : bundles contained in sacks of woven silk and consisting of black aloe bark as pounded collyrium ; *Gośīrṣa* sandal stealing the fiercest inflammation away ; camphor cool, pure, and white as bits of ice ; scent bags of musk oxen, *kakkola* sprays, clove flower bunches, and nutmeg clusters, all bristling with masses of ripe fruit ; cups of *ullaka* (a fruit-iuice ? a kind of decoction ?), diffusing a fragrance of the sweetest wine ; heaps of black and white cowries : carved boxes of panels for painting, with brushes and gourds attached : curious pairs of *kinnaras,* orang-outangs *(vana-mānuṣa), jīvañjīvaka* birds, and mermen (*jala-mānuṣa*) with necks bound in golden fetters : musk deer scenting the space all round them with their perfume : female *cāmara* deer (=yak cows), used to running about the house : parrots, *śārikās*, and other birds enclosed in gold-painted bamboo cages and chattering copious wit : partridges in cages of coral : and ring of hippopotamus (*jala-hastin*) ivory, encrusted with rows of huge pearls from the brows of elephants.'

The above list of presents enumerates some of the most remarkable artistic and economic products of Assam. Fine silks and various kinds of silk weave, and books on aloe bark, as well as cane and bamboo work and ivory ornaments, were the artistic crafts in which Assam excelled then as now.

18. *Assam's Roll of Honour during* 650—1200 *A.D.*

It appears that after Bhāskara-varman's demise his family or line was supplanted by another dynasty, equally Indo-Mongoloid in origin, which ruled Assam roughly from 650 to 800 A.D. This is the dynasty of Śāla-stambha, who is described in an inscription of king Ratnapāla of a subsequent dynasty (the Bargaon copper-plate grant of this king, dating from the first half of the 11th century) as a Mleccha

or non-Hindu overlord (*mlecchādhināth*a). From the inscriptional evidence from various sides, it would appear that the line started by Śāla-stambha had some 20 kings, names of some of whom have been given in the various inscriptions, namely, Vigraha-stambha, Kumāra, Vajra-deva and Harīsha or Harsha-varman. It appears that the daughter of Harsha-varman or Harīsha of this dynasty, Rājyamatī, was married to King Jaya-deva-Para-cakra-kāma of Nepal, as mentioned in the Paśupati inscription in Nepal dated c. 748 A.D. In the Nepal inscription, Hrrsha-varman, or Harīsha of the Assam records, has been described as Sri Harsha-deva, *Gauḍa-Oḍrādi-Kaliṅga-Kośala-pati*, and Rājyamati has been called *Bhagadatta-rājakula-jā* : this would suggest that by the middle of the 8th century, the line of Śāla-stambha claimed to be or was regarded as being descended from the renowned hero from Assam mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*. But the distinct mention of Śāla-stambha as being a lord of the Mlecchas, as in the Bargaon copper-plate of the 11th century, would appear to make it clear that he was a Boḍo chief of the *Mech* tribe (Sanskritised as *Mleccha*), who followed Bhāskara-varman in assuming the rulership of Assam.

The evidence from the Nepal inscription would suggest that the glory of Bhāskara-varman as a great conqueror from Assam was upheld or revived by King Harsha-deva of this line : Harsha-deva, c. 748 A.D., has been described in the Nepal record as *Gauḍa-Oḍrādi-Kaliṅga-Kośala-pati,* which would imply that he ruled not only over Assam but also over Bengal, Orissa, part of Kaliṅga, and in Kosala or Eastern U.P.

The dynasty of Prālambha which next followed, and that of the Pālas of Kāmarūpa, appear also to have been of Hinduised Boḍos who took a great interest in Hindu religion and culture and Sanskrit studies which they had accepted

as their own. The whole of the Brahmaputra valley was not yet consolidated into a single state, and after the native dynasty of the Pālas, a new and a short-lived line of kings started in East Assam, calling itself the Lunar Dynasty (*Candra-vaṃśa*), who, in spite of their claim to ancient Aryan blue-blooded descent, were probably equally of local Boḍo origin. This dynasty continued to about 1200 A.D., after which started a new epoch in the History of Assam, with the starting of the Mohammedan (Turki) invasions and the coming and establishment of the Ahoms (1228).

We shall discuss the achievements of Assam in the early period of her history in our next lecture.

LECTURE II

1. *Assam, the* nidus *of Kirāta Tribes in India, and the Venue of Indo-Chinese Trade, Becomes a Part of Hindu India before the Christian Era*

The ancient and early medieval periods of Assamese and Indian history were over by 1200 A.D., and some noteworthy developments took place about the end of this period. If we were to mention in specific terms the place of Assam in the history and civilisation of India during this ancient and early medieval periods, we could say that during the ancient period, coming down to a few centuries after Christ, Assam formed the reservoir or *nidus* for the fourth great element in the formation of the Hindu people, viz., the *Kirāta* of the Mongoloid element, and it was the highway (before the routes through Central Asia and North-Western India were discoverd, opened up and used by Chinese) for material trade and sometimes arts and crafts and even ideas to pass between China and India. At the same time, the gradual winning over of the *Kirāta* or Mongoloid peoples of Assam, who were living in some areas side by side with the *Nishādas* or Austrics like the Khasis and with the Dravidians, within the world of the Indian or ancient Hindu Man, had started from this ancient period, possibly from before 1000 B.C. Bhagadatta, as we have seen before, is symbolical of this early transformation of the purely Mongoloid into the complex Indian Man. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea,* a 1st century A.D. Greek work on the navigation of the Arabian Sea and on the trade by sea between India and

Egypt and the Roman world, gives indication of business done by *Kirāta* or Mongoloid tribesmen of various groups, linking up India with Tibet and China ; and this volume of trade was being carried on between North-Eastern India and South-Western China for centuries, even though the Indians on the one hand and the Chinese on the other hand had no official or formal or widespread knowledge of this trade. In the time of the *Periplus,* as the Greek explorer or geographer knew about it from South India and Egypt, this trade was in commodities like malabathrum from the Himalayan regions and in raw silk yarn and silk cloth from *Thinai* or China. But prior to that, as the report of the Chinese military man, political officer and explorer Chang K'ien of the 2nd century B.C. has made it clear, there was a trade route from Assam to South-West China, officially not known to or recognised by the Chinese Government, through which Chinese manufactured goods like (silk) cloth and bamboo flutes came into India, to be exported again from India through her North-Western trade routes into Central Asia. The art of rearing silk worm and manufacturing silk as well as weaving silk into cloth may very well have first come to Assam and India through this route, independently of the Central Asia route through which the Chinese Princess and her Syrian Christian followers smuggled silk cocoons to the lands of the West. Long before the visit of the first Indian Missionaries of Buddhism into China from Central Asia, viz. of Kasyapa Matanga (Kia-yeh Mo-tang) and Gobharaṇa (Chu-fa-lan), in the 1st century A.D., Indian notions and ideas and possibly Indian stories and folk-lore penetrated into China, probably as early as the 4th century B.C., through Assam and Northern Burma. And Indian Kshatriya adventurers were going to Burma (among the Pyus and the Mons) and to Indo-China (among the Khmers) probably from the middle of the 1st millenium B.C. In the matter of ideas, it was not a one-way traffic only, for, judging from the account of the Chinese song about the glories of

the great T'an emperor finding its way into Assam as narrated by Bhāskara-varman in the 7th century to Hiuen Ts'ang (as we have noted before), Chinese ideas were also coming into India. This trade route brought to India at least three Chinese words which we have in Sanskrit,—*viz. Cīna* (from the name of the powerful *Ts'in* dynasty which first united China in the 3rd century B.C.) as the Indian (and from India the Western—cf. Middle Iranian *Cīn*, Arabic *Sīn*, late Greek *Sinoi*, Chinese *Sini*), name for the land and people of China; *Kīcaka*, for a kind of light bamboo out of which flutes were made (from Old Chinese **Ki-chok*, "Ki-bamboo"), and *musāra* meaning a kind of precious stone, or coral (from Old Chinese **mwa-sad* or **mwa-sar*, Modern Chinese *mo-so*: vessels made of semi-precious stone as tributes from Prāgjyotiṣa are already mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*—these were probably Chinese in origin : in Lecture I, pp. 28 f.) ; just as from Central India came to medieval Sanskrit the word for paper, *śaya*, now no longer in use (from Chinese *tsieh*=paper. *Sindūra* (=*nāga-rakta*='blood of the Dragon' as the Chinese described it)='vermilion, red lead' (from *ts'in-tung*, as suggested by Dr. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi), seems to have come to India from China with its Chinese name through Assam—it must have been a very old import in Eastern India, considering the importance of vermilion in the social and religious ritual of the peoples of Eastern India. Also the Eastern Indian (Bengali) word *tasara*, to mean a special kind of silk, may be of Chinese origin, coming through Assam, although Assam has got neither this kind of silk nor the word for it (Dr. Bagchi thinks the word may be from Chinese *ta-su*=Early Chinese of c. 500 A.D. **dhai:swo*='Great silk stuff, Chinese silk' ; the common Chinese words for silk, *Seu* and *Su* from earlier **si* and **swo*, might have had a form in *-r*—**ser*—whence the Greek name for the Chinese people—*Seras*='the Silk people'. It is also not unlikely that *tasara* is from old Indo-Aryan *trasara*, 'spindle',

which sense is partly preserved in Oriya *tasanā*, 'yarn that is wound round a roller').

The steady Hinduisation of the Tibeto-Burman (mainly Boḍo) people during this ancient period brought about a Sanskritisation of the local pre-Aryan names of both Sino-Tibetan and Austric origin, and in bringing them in line with Brahmanical Hindu notions and religious notions current among its people. Sacred places of the pre-Hindu religious world were gradually Hinduised, with the myths and legends which were being gathered in the *Purāṇas*. Indirect influence of the Kirāta people in the evolution of late Vedic and Brahmanical Hindu ritual can also be postulated in this way (cf. *Kirāta-jana-kṛti*, p. 36).

2. *Progressive and Intensive Hinduisation of Assam from the Early Centuries A.D.*

From after the Christian era, the influence of the mixed or composite Gangetic civilisation grew greater than ever in Assam, and a gradual Aryanisation of the local Boḍo and Austric peoples continued, and judging from the trend of this Aryanisation in Bengal, it was most vigorous at the time of the Gupta emperors. I have expressed the view that when Hiuen Ts'ang visited Assam, the Aryanisation in language of the Boḍo masses of Assam does not appear to have progressed much. The notable remnants of Boḍo speech in most parts of Assam at the present day, both to the North and South of the Brahmaputra and as far West as North Bengal, as well as in Tripurā in East Bengal, would show that a thousand or twelve hundred years ago Assam was, except for its upper classes and Brahman and other settlers from Bengal and Bihar, very largely Tibeto-Burman (Boḍo) in speech. In this, Assam stood all by herself in the comity of Hindu peoples of North India, and Nepal and Tipperah and Manipur, and probably also Sylhet and Comillah (the

ancient Paṭṭikerā) agreed with Assam ; and, of course, Aracan. But during this early medieval period, c. 900-1200 A.D., a shrine like that of Kāmākhyā was coming to have a pre-eminence even outside Assam, and like Gayā in Bihar and Purī in Orissa, and unlike Banaras and Prayāga, Ujjayinī and Kāñcīpura, it was not yet a shrine of pan-Indian importance.

3. *The Aryanisation in Language of Eastern India including Assam*

By the end of the early medieval period, that is by 1200 A.D., Assam, meaning specifically the plain-lands watered by the Brahmaputra, definitely appears to have become a part of Aryan-speaking India. The Magadhan Prakrit of Bihar slowly extended to the East, by crossing the Ganges into Central and Eastern Bengal, and by spreading to the East into West Bengal, and of course to North Bengal overland from North Bihar partly and partly from Central and East Bengal, and in this way from North Bengal into Assam. The Magadhi Prakrit altered to the Magadhi Apabhramsa group of dialects, of which we can note three: a *Western,* which has now been transformed into Bhojpuri and Sadani.; a *Central*, from which came Maithil and Magahi : and an *Eastern,* the source of Bengali-Assamese and Oriya. Assamese and Bengali are so very similar that we would be justified in speaking of them as uterine sisters within the same Bengali-Assamese group. Old Assamese and Old Bengali converge into a single speech, which, of course in its dialects, was current, say, all over the area which Bhāskara-varman ruled in the 7th century A.D. The Aryanisation of the ruling classes in the Western part of this Assamese-Bengali language area was completed at least as early as c. 400 A.D., when we find a powerful king of West Bengal, King Chandravarman of Puṣkaraṇā (present-day village of Pokharna in Bankura district) carving an

inscription bearing his name as a devotee of Vishnu on Susunia Hill in West Bengal. Bengali and Assamese possess the same tradition in their earliest literature : and certain compositions (e. g. the *Caryāpadas.* the distichs of wisdom attributed to Dāk and Khanā) have been claimed by both Assamese and Bengali.

While with the general acceptance of the Assamese language (Old Assamese. and before it Bengali-Assamese form of Magadhi Apabhramsa) and consequent spiritual affiliation of Assam to Northern or Aryan India, the finishing touches in the formation of the Hindu people of Assam, predominantly Boḍo, and partly Austric Mon-Khmer (Khasi) and Dravidian, and to some extent "Aryan" from the West, were being given, Assam was confronted with two *evenements* in her history which were of profound importance for herself, and which also had repercussions for centuries for the rest of North India. Both these *evenements* were in the form of foreign invasions : one, which as an invasion was temporary, but which changed completely the facade of the Assamese people and gave to Assam her present name ; while the other continued to harass and disturb Assam for centuries, from the beginning of the 13th until Assamese organisation and heroism finally freed the State from this harassment during the closing decade of the 17th century.

4. *The High Middle Ages in Assam : the Coming of the Ahoms, and the Moslem Invasions : Boḍo vs. Ahom*

The first invasion was that of the Ahoms from Burma in the east in 1228 ; and the second series of invasions was that of the Mohammadans, starting also from the 13th century A.D. when in 1205 the Turks after conquering Bengal tried to break into Assam, to be followed by a long series of invasions by the Turki and Pathan and finally Mogul Muslim ruling houses of Bengal and Upper India.

The history of Assam during what may be called the "High" and "Late" Medieval ages, from 1200 to 1800 A.D., was characterised on the one hand by the stabilisation of her people in its language and culture as an Aryan-speaking Hindu people under the leadership of the Ahoms, themselves originally of Sino-Tibetan Thai speech, and on the other by the stiff and finally successful resistance which was offered by the Ahom rulers to Mohammadan aggression from Bengal. Some 450 years of efficient administration under the puissant Ahoms brought to the peoples of Assam some sort of centralised peaceful and orderly rule, which enabled various tribes to fuse into a single Assamese-speaking nation of medieval India under the cultural leadership of the Brahmans and later of the Vaishnavas, which supplemented the military and political lead and organisation supplied by the Ahoms. Bit by bit, the Ahoms conquered the whole of the Brahmaputra valley, and brought under their tutelage not only their powerful Boḍo predecessors and rivals in the land like the Chutiyas and the Dimasas (Kacharis), but also the hill peoples like the Nagas and the Mikirs; and during the days of their greatest glory (as between 1680-1720), they had also brought under their power their erstwhile rivals the Kacharis and the Khasis and Jaintias (Syntengs). The only great disputants to their power were the Western Boḍo tribes of West Assam and North Bengal, prominent among whom were the Koches : and for a century, the 16th, the Koches under two of their most efficient Kings, Viśwanātha Simha and Naranārāyaṇa Simha (aided by his brother Śukladhvaja (alias *Cilā Rāy* or "the Kite King", so called because of his successful tactics of lightning attack in war) formed their great empire in East India which seems to have effectively kept the Ahoms in check within their territories in Central and Eastern Assam.

For 450 years, Boḍo and Ahom fought with each other for mastery, and the both gradually merged into a single

Assamese-speaking people, to-day, the Ahom speech becoming completely extinct and the Ahoms only surviving as a caste of Hindu Assamese, and the Boḍos faring no better—although a fairly wide survival of their language has been instrumental in reviving a Boḍo consciousness and a Boḍo nationalism to some extent, even in present-day Assam, with its dominant Aryan language. The Ahoms lost their language entirely for two reasons : first, they were much fewer in number when compared with the Boḍo and others ; and secondly, they were certainly more receptive to new ideas, and were in temperament more adaptive.

5. *Assam's Resistance to Turki and Mogul Aggression through the Centuries—Her Great Participation in History of India*

The Turki, Pathan and Moghul Mohammadan invasions of Assam, involving attacks on Assam territory where lived the Hindu Assamese and the semi-Hinduised Boḍo and Ahom Sino-Tibetans, by not only Muslims of foreign origin like the Turks and Pathans but also their auxiliaries and mercenaries and levies like converted North Indian Muslims, Rajputs and other Hindus, and Bengali Moslems and Hindus, brought to full play the sturdy qualities of the Assam people under Ahom leadership. The Ahoms themselves were not always sure of those Boḍo princes and their peoples who acknowledged only half-hearted obedience to their Ahom conquerors. But nevertheless, for nearly five centuries they held their own against the Muslim aggressors from Bengal and from Upper India through Bengal, and with their strong bodies of foot soldiers eventually forced them out of their country, the formidable mail-clad horsemen, Turki and Mogul and Rajput, finally getting the worse of it in the protracted struggle.

In the pan-Indian context, it was not an achievement

of a mean order. "In giving successful resistance to Muslim aggression, distance from Delhi was no doubt a great factor; and the rainy season in Bengal and Assam was a great asset for defence. Yet all these invasions had their bases in Bengal, at Dacca and at Gaur ; and the distance from Delhi to Koch Bihar, Gauhati and Rangpur (Jorhat) in Assam, and to Udaipur in Tripura, is not greater than that from Delhi to Bijapur or Golconda. The doughty lightarmed foot-soldiers (*pāiks*) of Mongoloid origin, as a mobile body of troops, were more than a match for the Turki, Pathan, Mogul and Rajput mail-clad horsemen in the terrain of North and East Bengal and Assam. And these lightarmed and very mobile *pāiks* of Bengal, particularly of North Bengal, of Tripura and of Assam, who stemmed the tide of Muslim advance on many an occasion, have to be given their due recognition, side by side with the other and more famous fighters of India—the Panjabi Hindus (Jats and Rajputs), Muslims and Sikhs, the Rajputs of Rajasthan and North India, the North Indian Hindus and Mussalmans, the Marathas, the Oriyas, and the Telugus and the Gonds, the Bhils and the Minas, the Kannadigas and the Tamilians, and the Nayars of Kerala."

In resisting this Muslim aggression, one Ahom ruler at least, King Rudra Siṃha (1691-1714), manifested a farsightedness and a well-thought out plan of operation against the Muslims in Eastern India which mark him out among the great patriot monarchs of Hindudom. This matter we shall have occasion to revert to once again later.

6. *Ahom Participation in the Racial and Cultural Synthesis in Assam*

The Ahoms in their greatest century, the 17th, were still far from being completely Hinduised, although the masses whom they ruled over and trained to fight beside them were

Hindus. The account left by the Muslim writer Shihābuddīn who accompanied the Mogul General Mir Jumlah to Assam in 1662 is quite detailed, and exceedingly interesting, and throws very valuable light on the life and ways of the Ahoms and on their military prowess and bravery in war. The Hinduisation of the Ahoms and similar people of Kirāta origin was a process which we can observe most statisfactorily from the history of Assam, and this enables us also to form an idea of how this process has been at work in other parts of India too where the people were either Tibeto-Chinese speakers as in Assam (e.g. in Nepal), or Austric or Dravidian speakers.

The Ahom advent into India formed a part of a general movement of the Dai or Thai people from South China which appears to have been going on during the second half of the first millennium A.D. in South-East Asia, and led ultimately to the settlement of the Laos in Indo-China (Vietnam), of the Thai proper or the Siamese in Norther Siam (and then all over Siam), and of the Shans in Northern Burma. It is not necessary in the present context to discuss the history of these movements. From Shan-land in North Burma, these hardy Sino-Tibetan hill-men, speaking what may be described as a from of Siamese, and first cousins to the Boḍos and other Tibeto-Burmans already established in Assam and India, followed the course of the Luhit and the eastern tributaries of the Brahmaputra after crossing the Patkai Range, and found themselves at the extreme east of the Brahmaputra Valley. The first Shan or Thai invaders consisted of 9000 men, women, children—it is generally surmised that the bulk were adult males who had to provide themselves with wives from among the local Boḍo tribes. In this way, miscegenation among the two branches of the great Kirāta people started early. the language of the Ahoms as that of the ruling class and as one possessed of its own script (which they had brought from Burma,

although this script was of Indian origin) and of a literary tradition of its own, naturally had greater prestige. The Boḍo dialects were not yet written down, and what meagre literature it had of songs and fairy tales and traditional myths and legends was all oral, and hence it was suffering under a great handicap when placed in front of Ahom. The Ahoms kept up their language and built up a remarkable historical literature in it, the *Buranji* literature, which was at its height in the 17th century ; but they gradually succumbed to the ever-growing influence of the Aryan Assamese, which drove both Ahoms and Boḍos who were in the plain land of Assam to the wall and brought about the final linguistic extinction of the Ahoms by the middle of the last century, and it no longer persists as a living speech in any part of the valley, or elsewhere. The Boḍo and the Ahoms may be compared to the Anglo-Saxons and Normans in England—only both were overshadowed in the cultural sphere by the Assamese Aryan speech, which ultimately caused the disappearance of the one and almost complete elimination of the other.

7. *The Gifts of the Ahoms to Assam and India : the Name Ahom-Asam*

The gift of the Ahoms to Assam was primarily in their military organisation and their administration. Nothing so practical and elaborate and efficient appears to have existed not only in Assam but also in the whole of Eastern India. The Ahoms were so powerful that the kingdom they carved out for themselves came to be associated with their name as a nation. The old names Prāgjyotiṣa and Kāmarūpa have continued—the last also survives in its New Indo-Aryan or vernacularised form as *Kāmarū*, *Kāwañrū* and *Kāwunr*—but the commonest name both among the people of Assam themselves and others in other part of India is *Asam or Aham,* the tribal name of the Ahoms. This word

has not been fully explained—and a common derivation is from the Sanskrit—*A-sama* "without peer", "non-pareil", as an epithet of distinction for this warrior race who established themselves as the ruling race in the Valley of the Brahmaputra.

I venture to suggest the affiliation of the name *Ahom-Asam* to a likely tribal name of the Ahoms themselves which has been adopted by the Burmese. When the Burmese met the Shan people (of whom the Ahoms were a branch), they noted their name and wrote it down in the Mon script they had adopted in the 11th century as *Rhwam*. In the course of centuries, owing to certain characteristic developments of Burmese phonology, the word has now come to be pronounced in Modern Burmese as *Shan*, although the old orthography as *Rhwam* still persists (*Rhwam* > * *yhwam* > * *hyam* > * *ç,yam* > *Shan* : the Portuguese and Indian and other names for the Siamese people and their country, *Siam, Sciam, Śyāma,* would all appear to go back to this late Burmese pronunciation of the word as **ç,yam*). Now, the name *Ahom* would appear to be connected as a tribal name with this *Rhwam* : was it a case of early dropping of the initial *R-* in Ahom mouths, or its modification to *A,* to give the form *Ahom* ? In the development of Assamese from Magadhi Prakrit and Apabhramsa, Old and Middle Indo-Aryan interior sibilant (*ś=ś, ṣ, s*) became *h*. This also characterised East Bengal dialects as well. So *daśa* > *dah, mānuṣa* > *mānuś* > *mānuh, vāmśī* > *bā̃hī, *asanta* > *hāt,* etc. (In later times, Sanskrit and other sibilants became in Assamese the guttural spirant *x*, and this pronunciation is now quite a characteristic of Assamese). *Ahom* as a foreign tribal name was not properly understood by Old Assamese speaking Hindu and other Bodos when the Ahom conquerors came into East Assam, and it would appear that the name *Ahom* was sought to be "corrected", into what was thought

to be its original Sanskrit form, as *A-sama* and this gave the word *Asam-Assam* as the name of the country which the Ahoms conquered and established themselves in.

It is not our object here to give an account of Ahom history. This history was largely that of a struggle for supremacy between the Ahoms as new-comers and the Boḍos as the earlier inhabitants of Assam Valley, and of struggles and intrigues among the members of the Ahom nobility for power. The Nagas and other tribes like the Mikirs to the South of the Brahmaputra and the Miris, Daflas and others to the North of the river were also engaged by the Ahoms, and these were mostly forced to accept the overlordship of the Ahoms. Brahman influence on the whole sought to preserve a balance between Ahom and Boḍo. Up to this time, the greatest Ahom king was Su-hung-mung (1497-1539), who subjugated the Eastern Boḍos (the Chutiyas) and the Kacharis, and fought Mohammadan invaders in Bengal, but had to maintain friendly relations with the Western Boḍos (Koches) of Western Assam and North Bengal who had built up a great kingdom under Viśva Simha and Naranārāyaṇa, two of the most powerful Koch kings.

The Ahoms unified Assam. They fought the Mohammadan invaders, and after varying fortunes in war, they finally drove them out of their territory in 1681, when they fought with the Moguls during the heyday of their power. The Ahoms were very practical in the art of war—they learned from the Mohammadans the use of fire-arms during the early part of the 16th century, and themselves soon became experts in the manufacture of guns and matchlocks.

The Ahoms also had a sense of history. It is remarkable how this sense of the historical characterised the Kirāta peoples more than the Aryo-Dravido-Austric Hindus of

other parts of India. The Newars of Nepal had their chronicles, the oldest of which go back to the fourth quarter of the 14th century. The Tipras, a Boḍo tribe who gave their name to Tripurā State, started a regular history in Bengali verse from the end of the 15th century, and their priests, known as *Comtāwās* or *Contāis* used to keep accounts of olden times. The Manipuris also preserved historical tales. And the Ahoms made history writing quite a distinctive thing of Assam—in both Ahom, the Thai Sino-Tibetan language brought to Assam by the Ahoms, and in the Aryan Assamese. History the Ahoms knew by their own word, *buranji*, and this word, with the art of history writing, was taken over by the Aryan-speaking Assamese, probably from the 17th century. There was during this century a very great rapproachment between the Ahoms and the Brahmans and other Hindus. The Ahoms had by this time become bilingual, and the Hindu Assamese, speaking the Aryan Assamese language, would appear to have picked up the art of writing history from their masters and their priests and chroniclers. The result was the development in the Assamese language of a terse and vigorous and withal exceedingly picturesque prose style for writing history; and the neighbouring Bengali and Maithili were both denied the possession of the fine means of expression for several centuries. East Assamese prose as in *Buranjis* stands on a very high pedestal when compared with the prose in Early Oriya and in Early Brajbhakha as well as in Early Gujarati, Early Marathi and Early Western Panjabi. The style of the *Buranjis* is something quite distinctive and characteristic. It is racy of the soil—it reflects the spoken language of the people, and is always straightforward and direct. It contrasts very favourably with the ornate and florid style of most of the Persian historical works written in India in which in some at least of the writers, the author is more anxious to flatter some royal patron and to show off his scholarship than to narrate historical events soberly. This

certainly has been one of the greatest gifts of the Ahoms to the Indo-Aryan language which they ultimately adopted, and in this way they were directly responsible in endowing Assamese with the great glory of a tradition of writing annals and historical anecdotes in beautiful and forceful prose. We have reason to be grateful to Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan for giving us a beautifully edited series of these Early Assamese historical texts, which form quite a unique and a distinctive part of New Indo-Aryan literature.

8. *Military, Political and Administrative Achievement of the Ahoms*

The most noteworthy military achievement of the Ahoms, as has been suggested before, was their holding in check the Mohammadan expansion from North India through Bengal. The first attack of Assam by Bakhtyar Khilji ended in disaster for the Turks. The Assamese King who destroyed them was evidently a Hinduised Boḍo—the Ahoms had not yet entered Assam through its easternmost gate in the year 1205 (=Saka 1127) when "the Turks coming into Kāmarūpa were destroyed", as the North Gauhati rock-inscription in Sanskrit states :

Śāke turaga-yugmeśe madhumāsa-trayodaśe
Kāmarūpaṃ samāgatya Turuṣkāḥ kṣayam āyayuḥ.

There were persistent efforts on the part of the Muslim rulers of Bengal (Turki, Pathan and Indian Muslim) to conquer Assam all through the centuries, and we have very detailed accounts of the campaigns of the Mogul generals in Assam. But these fights between the Ahom ruling house, between their Ahom and Boḍo and Hindu Assamese troops on the one hand, and the Bengalised Turki and Pathan and Mogul and North-Indian Muslims as well as Rajput and other Hindu troops under the Moguls on the other, show Assam in a peculiarly favourable light. Assamese kings stopped the Muslim flood from penetrating into Burma and

beyond in a wave of aggressive warfare and conquest. Colonisation, proselytisation and then conquest of Arab merchants and their religious teachers in Indonesia led to the final Islamisation of Indonesia. The Arabs and then later on Indian Muslim merchants from Western India found a direct line of access by sea to Malaya and Indonesia, but a land-route for aggresive advance was denied to the Indian Muslims by the Ahoms of Assam. Otherwise, the history of Burma and Siam and Indo-China might have been different.

Ahom kings like Chakradhvaja Siṃha, Ahom statesmen like Atan Burhagohain, and Ahom generals like Lachit Barphukan (c. 1670) showed much more enlightened and discriminating appreciation of the political situation in their part of India than perhaps the Rajputs and other fighting groups of Northern and Western India. The Marathas from the time of Sivaji onwards showed also a most noteworthy political sense and sagacity. Pratāp Siṃha, the great hero-patriot of Rajputana, who most stubbornly fought for the freedom of his land, lacked that vision for the establishment of a free India from which the forign "Turk" could be eliminated as a most unwelcome invader. The Rajput attitude was rather primitive and elemental. But the great Sivaji, with a sage and saint with a rare historic sense like Samarth Rāmadās to guide him, could conceive of the idea of a restored Hindu Sovereignty in India where the ancient Hindu ideal States could be reestablished. His fight with the Moguls thus exalted to a sacred mission, the significance and implications of which he was fully conscious of. Herein lies the superiority of Sivaji over other Indian heroes without an understanding of the political situation.

9. *Svarga-deva Rudra Siṃha Su-khrung-pha, the Sivaji of Eastern India* (1695-1714)

Assam produced at least one great ruler who could be easily compared with Sivaji and could in all truth be described

as "the Sivaji of Eastern India". This ruler was King Rudra Siṃha alias Su-khrung-pha, who ruled from 1691 to 1714; and he deserves to be known all over India as a Hindu ruler who was actuated by a desire to free the whole of Eastern India from the rule of the hated Mogul, because primarily they were enemies of the Hindu religion and culture to which Rudra Siṃha gave his allegiance but still retained a great deal of his Ahom heritage in religion and culture. He was born of remarkable parents. His father King Gadādhar Siṃha or Su-pat-pha was a powerful ruler who after a career of a hunted exile, a harassed scion of a royal house which was the plaything of a number of unscrupulous power-hunting noblemen, finally was able to make himself king and to assert his independence. Gadādhar Siṃha had felt attracted to the religion of his subjects, but still retained enough of his Ahom mentality to resist complete Hinduisation. He was a fighter who freed his royal inheritance from Mogul aggression. Gadādhar Siṃha's wife, who was Rudra Siṃha's mother, when she was just Jayamatī Kuwanrī or the Princess Jayamati married to Prince Gadāpāṇi (that was Gadādhar Siṃha's name then), and who never lived to share her husband's good fortune when the latter became king, was cruelly done to death by torture by the ruling Assam King who wanted to know about her fugitive and absconding husband's whereabouts. Jayamati refused to say anything, knowing that then he would be instantly apprehended and killed ; and it is said that even Gadāpāṇi visited her in secret and wanted her to give the information to escape torture, but she steadily refused. Jayamati became an example of the ideal wife with her unflinching love and devotion to her husband,—a worthy country-woman of Sītā and Sāvitrī, ideal Hindu wives of ancient story. A rime in modern Assamese which runs somewhat like this explains pithily the importance of the father, the mother and the son in the tradition of Assam's greatness :

Pitā Gadār bīratwa : mātā Jayār satītwa,
Putra Rudrar mahattwa : tini Asamar biśeṣatwa.

"The heroism of the father Gadādhara Siṃha ; the wifely devotion of the mother Jayamatī Kuwanrī ; and the greatness of the son Rudra Siṃha :—in these three is Assam's speciality.

Rudra Siṃha underwent with his father sufferings and privations during the latter's days of exile and hiding, and he became king after his father's death in 1691. He carried on the military glory of his father in the direction of making full conquest within the country. Circumstances made him interfere in a quarrel and consequent war between the Khasis (Jaintias) and the Kacharis, and this ended in his being master over both these peoples, the greater part of the hill tracts to the South of the Brahmaputra Valley. Then he formed a great scheme to fight the Moguls and other Muslims from Bengal who had been giving trouble for centuries to he Ahtoms as the rulers of Assam. And in this he was further actuated by the spirit of defending the Hindu people and the Hindu religion against the onslaughts of Islām. To succeed in his objective fully, he conceived of the idea of a concerted action against the Moguls in Bengal and Eastern India by building up a sort of confederacy among the Hindu princes and feudatories as well as big barons of Bengal and Bihar. He carefully thought out his plan, and he did not neglect to create an opinion in his favour and to enlist the sympathy of the leading people of Bengal for the cause for which he thought of crossing swords with the redoubtable Mogul Emperor of Delhi. He invited to his court scholars and artists, musicians and artisans, religious men and mendicants, and paid them handsome largesse according to their qualifications ; and to those scholars and Brahmans who could not come so far into Assam, he sent monetary presents. In this way a very favourable opinion was created abroad for him. At home, he began to prepare

and store arms and ammunition of all sorts—swords, spears, bows and arrows, guns and matchlocks, cannon and shells and gun-powder, and began to train up his soldiers, and also horses and elephants for war: and he did all this taking care not to disturb the economic life of the people.

While these preparations were going on, he looked round and tried to communicate with powerful Hindu chiefs and feudatories in Bengal and Bihar. It is not known how far he was able to come in touch with all the important leaders of the people in and around Bengal. He had sent a Brahman priest and scholar with attendants to far away Gaya to perform according to orthodox Hindu rites the obsequies of his father the late king Gadādhar Siṃha (who was however, interred according to Ahom rites at the Ahom national graveyard for kings at Charāideo). On his way back, he met at Dacca a person of distinction, Subaṃśa Ray, who suggested an alliance between the Ahom King and the Tipra King. Important persons in the meanwhile who were contacted by Rudra Siṃha's emissaries received the Ahom King's message in these terms: "The foreigners are destroying our religion while we kings following the Hindu religion are here. Therefore if we unanimously resisted the foreigners and save our religion, you know what a great thing it would be." He received general sympathy and approval, and then he went on with his preparations.

Rudra Siṃha could get in touch with at least another powerful Hindu King of Eastern India, the Tipra King of Tripura. There was exchange of envoys and of presents, and Rudra Siṃha, in addition to an open letter, in Sanskrit, asking for friendship with the Tripura King (a letter couched in high-sounding and very polite language), sent him a secret letter (*rahasya-patra*) as well. In this letter, he said to his brother of Tripura, Ratna-māṇikya-deva, in following terms (and this secret letter was in Bengali): "This has

become very widely current among the people that owing to the hostile actions of the Moguls the religion as inculcated in the Vedas does not get any protection. For this, if it appears to you to be the right thing to put a stop to this situation by some action, then please write to me in detail about your strength and aptitude after discussing with the big personages with whom you have friendship. All men are subject to God ; nevertheless, it is only proper to make an attempt in every way for this end, that in our own country we may carry on our princely tasks without any compulsion by another and may act according to our own will in all matters, and not be dependent on others. Other matters you will hear from Sri Ratna Kandalī and Arjuna Dāsa (the emissaries)."

10. *Rudhra Siṃha, the Heir of an Unfulfilled Renown*

The above letter fully and unequivocally expresses the mind of the man. The overtures made by Rudra Siṃha to get the support and co-operation of the Tipra King all came to nought, because after an exchange of envoys there was a palace revolution in Tripura, and Ratnamāṇikya was dethroned and murdered, and a step-brother ascended the throne and he was not at all interested in the nationalistic schemes of the Ahom King. We have a very detailed account of this episode in Rudra Siṃha's diplomatic relations with another Hindu state in Eastern India as it has been preserved by the two envoys themselves, Ratna Kandalī and Arjuna Dāsa, in a prose *Buranji* or history (this is a work of history with quotations of state records plus a detailed work of travel known as the *Tripurā-Buranji* wnich has been edited by Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan). This work is one of the most remarkably accurate and at the same time fascinating accounts of a diplomatic tour available in any literature, and we feel very grateful to the authors, who compiled in 1724 this work giving events of from 1709 to 1715, for the detailed

and obviously true accounts they have given of all aspects of court life and travel in Eastern India from Assam to Tripura. Unfortunately, we have no other work of this type from the other envoys whom Rudra Siṃha might have sent to the other Hindu kings and feudatory chiefs of Eastern India, like the King of Morang in Northern Mithila and South-Eastern Assam, of Vana-Vishṇupur in West Bengal, the Raja of Nadiya, the Raja of Behar (that is Koch Bihar), the *Zamindār* Kīrttichandra of Burdwan and the *Zamīndār* Uday Nārāyaṇ of Baḍnagar and Nāṭor (Rājshāhi) in North Bengal, whose names are mentioned in the *Tripurā Buranji*. In any case, Rudra Siṃha would appear to have been very much heartened by the responses he received, and he went on with his military programme and his preparations, and was on the eve of launching an attack upon the Mogul forces in Bengal, when in 1714 death cut him short and put an end to his plans, and stopped for ever the likelihood of a Hindu uprising in Eastern India comparable to that of the Marathas in Western India.

Rudra Siṃha of Assam was thus "the heir of an unfulfilled renown" who was not fated to drive his project to a successful termination. Yet he is to be given all honour due to him for all his aims and ideals and his plans as he could achieve it in practice. He can be called as has been said before the Sivaji of Eastern India : if Providence had permitted a co-operation between a Sivaji in the Deccan and a Rudra Siṃha in Assam and Bengal, the history of India would have been quite different. The personality of Rudra Siṃha has an all-India significance. Certainly, not noly Assam but the whole of India can feel proud of Rudra Siṃha Su-khrung-pha – the Ahom King.

After Rudra Siṃha, there was a gradual decay of Ahom power throughout the whole of the 18th century. Religious wars started, as between Śāktas and Vaishṇavas, and

between the different sects of the Vaishṇavas, each party or sect being backed by a king or by some powerful member or members of the nobility. The final *coup* was given by the Burmese, who invaded Assam, inflicted untold and most savage sufferings upon the people, paving the way for the final annexation of Assam by the British and making it a part of the province of Bengal, Assam being anministered from Calcutta.

11. *The Bases of Modern Assamese Culture Established during the Six Centuries of the Ahoms*

During the six hundred years of Ahom rule, i.e. during the late medieval period in the history of Assam from say 1200 to 1800 A.D., Assam produced a number of good generals and statesmen, and, above all, saints and poets. The generals and statesmen served India by serving Assam, and so too, the poets and saints. Incessant warfare, and control of the country by kings who were but half-way Hindus right up to the end of the 17th century could hardly be propitious to the development of Sanskrit studies, and Assam has not much to boast of in this matter. But literature in Assamese developed as in the other sister Indo-Aryan speeches, and Assam's literary output for a small people who even now do not come up to 7 millions has been quite noteworthy. Medieval Assam gave to India at least two great poets who were in the pan-Indian Bhakti tradition, viz. Śankara-deva and Mādhava-deva. The importance of both in the life and culture of Assam is of the first rank. From a land of primitive Animism which was being affiliated to Saivism and the Saktaism of the *Tantras,* Śaṅkara-deva and Mādhava-deva transformed Assam into a country of an advanced humanism. Unfortunately, the message of Śaṅkara-deva did not go out of Assam, except among a few Vaishṇavas in Bengal.

Assam produced other types of literature which are almost as significant as the *Buranjis*. This matter, as well as the heritage and achievements of Assam at the present day in a pan-Indian context, will be taken up in the next discourse.

Two factors prevented Assam from playing a greater part in the affairs of India during the six hundred years of Ahom rule. These were—(1) the distance of Assam from the hub of the Universe in India—Delhi-Agra, Banaras-Patna, Nadiya-Dacca on the one hand and Vijayanagara and other great states in the Deccan and the south on the other. Assam was in a distant corner away from the highway of history in India, so to say, and so apt to be unnoticed. (2) The second factor was Assam having remained independent and not having formed a part of a Muslim empire of North India. It alwys remained a strange country, with its Tibeto-Burman speaking masses (in spite of the Aryan language and religion making good progress there) presenting a world peculiar to itself. In the Vaishnavism of Śankara-deva, too, Assam remained self-centered even in her religion. These thus formed handicaps for Assam's fuller participation in the political and cultural life of Medieval India.

LECTURE III

1. *A Common Language and Culture Unify the Assamese People during the Late Medieval Period*

The late medieval period in the history of Assam under the Ahom Kings was, as we have seen, a period partly of travail for Assam, when her various tribal peoples of Mongoloid origin—the original Boḍos and others, and the Austric peoples allied to the Khasis, together with that strong group of Shan new-comers the Ahoms—were finally welded together as a single Assamese-speaking nation—the Aryan Assamese language having already taken shape at the beginning of this period from the Magadhi Prakrit and Apabhramsa dialects brought by settlers from Bihar and North Bengal during the greater part of the first millennium A.D. Of course, owing to Hindu notions of caste going strong, which favoured, particularly in the medieval period, federation of the various groups where each group had become self-conscious rather than complete fusion, total miscegenation such as was taking place in the eariler period and such as we find in countries outside India, could not take place. Yet the caste sense closely knit them together within the Hindu fold, and made all groups feel, in the background of their common Aryan language, their Hindu religion with its institutions, feasts and festivals, and their political status as subjects of a free Hindu state which was holding its own against Muslim aggression from the west, as a single people—the "Asamiyā" or Assamese people. While this unification was going on with a common language and culture under a powerful dynasty of kings who gave a large modicum of

stable government, the very fact of independent existence cut Assam off to a large extent from the rest of North India. Isolation was the immediate result of an independent status which could not participate in the common Hindu-Muslim or Indo-Persian civilisation of North India ; and the basic Mongoloid elements also resisted this full participation.

2. *Assamese Isolation and Assamese Expansion : Cultural Links with Hindu World Outside, in Arts and Crafts ; Music and the Drama ; Painting ; Sculpture and Architecture ; and Textiles and Other Crafts*

Yet Assam was not wholly isolated. The pre-Ahom age perhaps saw greater and closer contacts with the Hindu world outside Assam, which was difficult to maintain when Bengal became a Muslim State after its conquest by the Turks. But through the Hindudom of North and East Bengal and Bihar, connexions were continued. The later Ahom King patronised the arts and crafts such as they could import from Bengal : craftsmen like artists and sculptors, masons and architects, were welcomed in Assam, and a new type of architecture in brick came to be establishsd in Assam through the erection of places and temples from the 16th century onwards. Musicians and dramatic artists were also welcomed from Bengal, and also from Mithila. Further, a distinct class of religious drama took its rise in Assam from at least the 15th century—a type of drama which was flourishing in Mithila (from Mithila it was taken to Nepal, where it became quite an important feature of the literature in the Aryan languages Maithili, Bengali and Kosali which developed in the courts of the Newari-speaking kings of the Nepal valley), the prototype of which we find in the *Gīta-Govinda* of Jayadeva (12th century A.D.) and the West Bengal *jhumur* dance-plays like what we find in the *Śrīkṛṣna-Kīrttana* of Boḍu Caṇḍīdāsa (? c. 1400 A.D.)

In this way, some of the arts developed in Assam which formed a link during the Ahom period with Bengal and Bihar. The art of book-illustration by means of small miniatures was an inheritance of Eastern India from the pre-Muslim Pāla Miniatures of Bengal and Bihar in Buddhist Sanskrit MSS., and later this was strengthened by the style of painting which developed in Bengal in illustrating particularly the wooden covers of MSS., and in that of the Mogul and Rajput miniatures. Yet during the 16th-18th centuries, Assam developed her own styles of miniatures which form a distinctive group within the frame-work of the art of the late medieval Indian miniature; but unfortunately this Assamese style (or styles) of miniatures, examples of which have from time to time appeared in print, in both colour and monochrome, has not yet been properly studied. It is to be seen to what extent the style of Hindu and Mogul (i.e. Indo-Persian with European influences) painting was modified by Mongoloid—Bodo and Ahom—influences. With the background of the wooden architecture of the Ahom houses and palaces, and the special costumes of the Assamese people, these miniatures illustrating Assamese books are indeed charming. One is reminded of the two exquisite miniatures—bust portraits—of King Siva Simha (the son of King Rudra Simha) and his Queen Ambika Devi which have been reproduced in colour for the appreciation of the outside world in Dr. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan's edition of the *Tungkhungia Buranji;* these have all the quality of the Delhi miniature portraits on ivory of kings and queens and noblemen of the Mogul Court, and yet the portrait of the dignified Ahom king and the beautiful Ahom queen with her hair done in a loose knot and wearing an embroidered scarf of golden *Muga* silk is quite a little gem (the King is dressed in the conventional North Indian court costume—the so-called Mogul dress of the 18th century). These miniatures from Assam illustrate Assamese history books as well as books on Hindu epic and *Purāṇa* stories, and we have pictures on

other subjects also, e.g., the care and training of elephants. Herein there was a distinct contribution by Assam to the late medieval art of painting in India.

The above mentioned two portrait-miniatures are just two out of many beautiful pictures in colour illustrating the Assamese poem, the *Śankhacūḍa-vaḍha Kāvya*. The *Hasti-vidyārṇava* is another MS. with most beautiful pictures illustrative not only of different kinds of the elephant but also of the court life of 18th century. Ahom kings and nobles. The 18th century was a great period for the miniature book illustration in Assam: the books are written in *pothi*-fashion on broad *sanchi* leaves and they form a speciality of Assam. These pictures form separate styles of late medieval Indian painting which have their place of honour beside the better known Mogul, Rajasthani, Kangra and other styles.

Assamese miniatures appear to show two distinct styles —one, the earlier style which is religious in inspiration, as e.g. in the great Assamese MS., written and illustrated in 1539 A.D., with its hundreds of pictures all in colour, of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as adapted into Assamese by Sankaradeva; and two, the later secular style (although books on religious subjects were illustrated in this style) of the 18th century in which some of the most precious MSS. of Assam, each worth a king's ransom, were illumined. The earlier style is simpler, more vigorous and more sincere, and have a stately epic character about them. The art-loving world is indebted to the loving care and spirit of religious dedication with which Sri Harinārāyaṇa Dutta Barua has with his slender means brought out all the pictures in this MS., in a sumptuous volume in both monochrome and coloured reproduction with descriptions in Assamese and Hindi, in a publication which ought to have been brought out nationally and not by an individual through his personal exertions (the *Citra-Bhāgavata* published 501 Sankara Era=1949 from

Nalbari, Assam). The quality of these pictures does not suffer in being enlarged on a large scale as wall-painting or frescoes, as one can see from the enlargements decorating the walls of the drawing room of Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua's house "Jiva-giri" in Gauhati where this great leader of the Assamese people had the happy thought of copying some of these exquisite pictures in fresco panels which have an arresting beauty. The 18th century style shows a happy blending of the basic Eastern Indian style of religious miniatures found in Orissa, Bengal and Assam with the more sophisticated Mogul and Rajasthani and possibly also Kangra art of the west. Here it is lyrical and romantic and the old epic vigour, even *rudesse*, is substituted by a poetic grace and beauty and frank pleasure in the simple and joyous expression of life with its colour and movement and pageantry. Typical scenes of the *joie de vivre* which characterises all society not suffering from the complexities and problems of an exacting age like ours at the present time can be culled as details from bigger compositions. One thing marks off these 18th century paintings of Assam—there are beautiful landscapes, mostly green and undulating plains with flower trees, and hills and rivers. It is a wonder how the beauty of nature as spread out over the face of the earth could captivate these artists of Assam in a way it never did artists in other parts of India. With the publication and study of the Assamese miniatures, a forgotten and a glorious chapter in the history of Indian painting will be opened up. In this matter the Governments of both the State of Assam and the Centre at New Delhi have a responsibility as preservers of Indian culture which cannot be neglected.

Sculpture in stone languished in North India after the establishment of Turki and other Muslim states. An age of wholesale temple and image breaking started, and new temples could not be easily erected, much less temples with lavish sculptural decoration where a Muslim king was ruling.

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Bengal barons and feudatories and rich men in places far away from the centres of Muslim power erected hundreds of temples all over Bengal, but the black basalt favoured in Bengal in pre-Muslim times for images and temple decoration could not be easily procured from the Raj Mahal hills. As a result, a new type of brick architecture developed in Bengal from the 15th century onwards, with lavish terra-cotta decoration in bas relief giving both figure compositions of an astonishing variety executed in a vigorous, and sometimes highly sophisticated style, and floral and geometrical and other decorations, both Hindu and Muslim in inspiration. A reflex of this we find in Assam also. Before the conquest of the sister-province of Bengal, Assam in pre-Muslim times was, in the matter of art—particularly stone sculpture, which has been preserved—just an extension of Bihar and Bengal, from Gupta times. We have in Assam some noteworthy specimens of early and late medieval Hindu sculpture (such as we find, for example, in Plates VI, VII, VIII, X, XIII, XIV, XV and XVII, in Raj Mohan Nath's *Backgroud of Assamese Culture*, Shillong, 1948). These are in the pan-Indian Hindu tradition which Assam shared with the rest of India. The establishment of Muslim power in Bengal and the advent of the Ahoms in East Assam both brought in a setback of the art traditions of Assam, and after a peried of decadence when lifeless and often grotesque imitations of images in the old style continued, a new style, probably of Boḍo rather than Ahom inspiration, manifested itself, characterised by a rude and quite a pleasing vigour (e.g., in some bas reliefs in Kāmākhyā Hill and elsewhere of plates IX, XII, XXV (terra-cottas from Sadiya) in Raj Mohan Nath's book). (These are also illustrated in Birinchi Kumar Barua's *Cultural History of Assam*, Part I, Nowgong, 1951). In the art of sculpture, circumstances were not propitious for late medieval Assam. The Ahom tradition of

wooden architecture made stone and brick (terra-cottas and stucco) not a very favourable medium of material for native Assamese artists and artisans.

But in another artistic craft—that of textiles, including both cotton and silk weaves, the Assamese people through the ages have always shown high artistic skill. These were already famous in the 7th century A.D., as we can see from their inclusion in the presents sent by Bhāskara-varman to Harsh-vardhana. In medieval times, Assam silk cloth of various kinds used to form distinctive objects sent out as presents to kings and nobilities. Assam has had the largest assortment of different kinds of silk, and the golden *Muga* silk and the very strong and warm *Endi* silk (made by feeding the silk worms on other kinds of leaves than that of the mulberry) are among the most remarkable stuffs in the line of silk textiles. Fine embroidered cloths of various kinds of silk are also known. These silks are produced by the people of the Brahmaputra Valley mainly, and by the Manipuris. The hill-peoples produce thick cotton cloth and blankets coloured with brilliant dyes, black, red, yellow and blue and with characteristic patterns. The excellence and special character of these textiles certainly form one of the most beautiful expressions of Assam's material culture.

Assam has its own style of brass and bell-metal vessels. The flat plates with engraved decoration on raised stands for eating from are of a type no longer preserved in other parts of India, but are found in Farther India (Burma) and Indo-China, and in Malaya and Indonesia. Ivory carving in Assam appears to have reached a high level of excellence, but at present it has languished a great deal. Foreign visitors during the 17th-18th centuries have praised the wooden architectural details, furniture in the Indian style, and wood carvings of all sorts. This art too has now decayed a great deal.

The isolation of Assam as a free Hindu state in a corner of India prevented it from benefiting to the fullest from the arts and crafts of other states in Northern India, and except for its silks Assam crafts could not spread to other parts of the country. But Assam was fully linked up with the rest of Hindudom in North India in the intellectual and spiritual planes. The Ahom rulers profited by their contact with the Moguls in bringing military knowledge of Assam in line with what was available in India. Matchlocks and guns were manufactured by the Assamese themselves, and they produced other arms and accoutrements including gun-powder themselves. And Mogul methods of administration were also in some matters taken over by the Ahom kings, to reinforce their own native system of administering and organising the country on a military basis.

3. *Intellectual and Spiritual Links with the Rest of India through Literature in Assam : the Brajabuli or Brajāwali Dialect*

The Assamese language had taken its shape about a couple of centuries before the coming of the Ahoms, and Assamese literature developed during the six centuries of Ahom rule. In the literary field, Assam had connexions with North Bengal and Mithila; and the influence of Mithila in the 15th-16th centuries on the literatures of both Bengal and Assam was profound. Maithil scholars now disdain their mother-tongue, but at least from the beginning of the 14th century we have a continuous line of development of Maithil literatere. The Maithil lyric attained its highest perfection in the hands of the poet Vidyāpati (c. 1350-1450), and the old Apabhramsa as well as the recent Maithil tradition in composing lyrics had their repercussions on the development of the Vaishnava devotional as well as romantico-religious lyrics of both Bengal aud Assam and to some extent of distant Orissa as well. A very mellifluous kind of poetic

language, certainly artificial in its nature, developed in the hands of the poets of Bengal and Assam from the 14th century onwards, and this came to be known as *Braja-buli* in Bengal, and *Brajāwalī* in Assam. It is a kind of Maithili mixed with Bengali in Bengal and with Assamese in Assam, with some earlier Apabhramsa and contemporary Western Hindi (Brajbhasha) forms. The name *Brajabuli* was given to it as the story of Krishna's sports in the land of Braja (or Vraja) near Mathurā where he spent his boyhood and early youth was narrated in lyrics composed (in medieval Bengal, Assam and Orissa) in this artificial literary language. The use of Brajabuli or Brajāwalī dialect in Assam is a case of direct participation in a common literary life in Eastern India, apart from the common origin of Assamese with Bengali and Oriya from an Eastern Magadhi Apabhramsa group of dialects, slightly different from the Central Magadhi group which developed into Maithili and Magahi, and from the West Magadhi Apabhramsa from which originated Bhojpuri and Sadani. Another noteworthy agreement with Nepal and Mithila and partly Bengal and Orissa is the religious drama which with Brajāwalī lyrics developed in Assamese during the 15th century. The Brajāwalī dialect was also used in prose portions in the dramas composed in the 16th century by Śankara-deva and others, before proper Assamese came into use. The oldest Maithili work that we know is the *Varṇa-ratnākara* of Jyotirīśvara Thākura (c. 1325) and that is also in prose. The possibility of a strong Maithil influence on Early Assamese becomes quite a probability when we find a general agreement between the styles of prose in the early stages of the two languages.

Apart from the general agreement of the Assamese Vaishnava lyric and drama with the similar Vaishnava lyrics and dramas found in Eastern India, in their form and content both, there is another point of contact among these—the music or melody of these lyrics. The usual *rāgas* or musical

modes and *tālas* or time-beats, such as we find e.g. in Maithili and Bengali lyrics, are also common to the Assamese devotional and other lyrics (*bargīts*, etc.). This would indicate that a common system of music was current in the whole of Eastern India including Assam, and this music was the classical Hindu Music of North India as it was taking its final shape in the courts of Hindu (and later on even Muslim) rulers during the period 1000-1500 A.D., culminating in the work of the Composer and Singer Tāna-Sena and his peers and contemporaries in the Court of Akbar during the second half of the 16th century. The Vaishnava *Sattras* as well as the courts of the Ahom and Koch Kings were centres of Music in Assam. A small but valuable literature on Music came into existence in Assamese (e.g. the work on *tāla* or time-beats by Yadupati, described by Sri Maheswar Neog in the *Journal of the Madras Musical Academy,* Vol. XXII, parts i-iv, pp. 147-153).

4. *Early Assamese Literature—Its Pan-Indian Bases and Its Special Achievement*

Assamese literature has been, even since its inception, a very strong intellectual and spiritual bond linking up the Assamese people with their neighbours to the West and beyond. In the first instance, like almost all the literatures in Modern Indian languages, Aryan and Dravidian, it has got a pan-Indian character because of its having developed under the tutelage of Sanskrit. The common Hindu heritage of the Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* and of the *Purāṇas,* and of a mass of other literature (on *Smṛti* or sacred law, on ritual, on *Sāhitya* or belles-lettres, etc.) has been made available to the Assamese-speaking people by a series of poets and saints and scholars who have flourished in Assam from the beginning of Ahom period right down to our day. It is rather significant that while the Sanskrit epics and *Purāṇas* were adapted in verse in Assamese

as serious literature which used to be chanted at home or sung to the accompaniment of music in solemn session as a devotional exercise, just like what we find in all other parts of India, the *Buranji* or historical literature was commonly in sober prose, terse and to the point, and seldom were the *Buranji* or historical themes treated in verse.

The excellences as well as the limitations of all modern Indian literatures in their early phases are also characteristic of Assamese. It was a religious and devotional and partly a philosophical literature, and books on secular subjets (excepting the *Buranji* histories and allied subjects) were rare. It must be mentioned that "early Assamese prose developed around the *Sattras* (monasteries) and the court; and consequently it acquired mainly two broad styles." (Birinchi Kumar Barua, *Studies in Early Assamese Literature,* Nowgong, 1953, pp. 82-83). The *Sattra* style represented Sanskrit learning and culture, and preferred a highly Sanskritic vocabulary; and the court style, as in the *Buranjis,* and letters and documents, reflected the life around much more faithfully and revelled in the use of pure Assamese words and words in common use, no matter from what source they were borrowed—Ahom or Boḍo, Perso-Arabic or other foreign. The *Sattra* style as in the *Kathā-Gītā* and the *Kathā Bhāgavata* of Bhatta-deva (c. 1558-1638 A. D.) was earlier in the field, and to have evolved a finished prose style in the 16th century was no mean achievement for an Indian language, at a time when prose was but rarely cultivated in the literature of India (with the exception of Early Western Panjabi, Early Gujarati-Rajasthani, Early Brajbhasha and Early Marathi, as well as Early Maithili, we do not find any prose style developed or largely used in any of the noted Indo-Aryan languages). Herein there might have been some indirect influence from Ahom and possibly also the distant Meithei or Manipuri, which had developed a pose style very early. The Assamese *intelligentsia* are quite

proud of their language and its literature, specially for its popular quality which has been the gift of the curtly secular literature as it developed under the Ahoms; and they are perfectly justified in taking pride in this matter.

It is not necessary to give a sketch of Assamese literature in the present context. Assamese and Bengali dialects both originated from virtually the same speech which was current in Bengal and Assam during 600-1000 A.D., and naturally the *Caryāpadas*, the oldest specimens of literature in the shape of mystic songs of the late Mahāyāna Sahajiyā sect which are found in the Aryan speech of the extreme east of India (Oriya, Bengali, Assamese) have been claimed by Assamese and Oriya (and even Maithil) scholars as being really in their own languages, as much as by Bengali scholars they have been claimed for Bengali. These go back to the period 950-1200 A.D. (some scholars would take the upper date to even 650 A.D., which linguistically does not seem probable). It would appear that from the 13th century, when Hema Saraswati at the instance of the Boḍo ruler of Kamatāpur in West Assam composed his *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* story of Prahlāda Assamese verse, we have a succession of poets from this time mostly in Western Assam who continued the practice which had become pan-Indian of rendering epic and *Purāṇa* stories into the mother-tongue. The famous Eastern Indian story of Bihulā and Lakhindar, which was so very popular and widely spread in Bengal, and was current also in the Magahī and Bhojpurī dialects, was also treated in Assamese by two poets Durgābar and Manakar who appear to have flourished before 1450.

5. *Śankara-deva, Assam's Great Saint and Religious Teacher and Organiser*

The greatest name in Early Assamese literature is that of Śaṅkara-deva, and he has left his stamp on Assamese

literature and culture, on Assamese religion and way of life. He was a poet and saint, religious teacher and social reformer all in one, and his influence on Assamese life and literature is comparable to that of Tulaśīdāsa for the people of the Upper Gangetic Valley (speakers of Braj and other Western Hindi, of Awadhi and other Kosali dialects, and even the Bhojpuri, Magahi and Maithil speakers). Śankara-deva is said to have lived for the uncommon span of 120 years : Assamese tradition places his birth in the year 1449 A.D., and his death in 1569 A.D. (Similarly, another great saint and mystic and poet of Medieval India, Kabir, is said to have lived also for 120 years—1398 to 1518 A.D). He became a widower four years after his marriage in 1473 at the age of 23, and he had a daughter by this marriage whom he married off at proper age. (His son-in-law was later beheaded by the order of a persecuting Ahom King). Then in 1483 A.D., in his 34th year, he started on a 12 years' grand tour of all the holy places of Hindudom in North India. After having visited Puri, Gaya, Sitakunda (near Munger), Banaras, Prayāga or Allahabad, Ayodhyā, Brindāvan and Mathurā, Dwārakā, Badarikāśrama and Varāhakunda (?), he returned home after 12 years (the number is conventional, it must be noted), and then married a second time. He had three sons by this marriage.

Śaṅkara-deva was well-educated in Sanskrit, and he composed one important work in the sacred language, the *Bhakti-ratnākara,* which was translated into Assamese verse by Rāmacaraṇa Thākura, a younger contemporary of Śaṅkara-deva. He raised Assamese literature to a very high level of excellence by his songs and hymns and his dramas and works on Vaishnava religion and practice. Before his time, the religious life in Assam appears to have been at a very low ebb. The people, Brahmans and the masses, were mostly Śāktas and their religion was largely an attempt to propitiate the dread Mother Goddess by offering sacrifices of

animals, and sometimes of human beings to her. There was very little of the spiritual in these cults and practices which were based on the Śākta *Tantras.* Śaṅkara-deva brought to the people of Assam the message of faith in the One Lord, who was Vishnu. He was uncompromisingly monotheistic, arguing that since Vishnu was All-God, there was no point in offering special worship to the other manifestations of the Divinity which were conceived as the various Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism. From this, the doctrine that he preached was called the *Ekaśaraṇa Dharma*—"the religion of taking refuge with the One God only." Naturally this went counter to the spirit of traditional Brahmanism based on the notions of caste and of worship through the various manifestations of the Deity. Śaṅkara-deva preached also the equality of men before God, and abjured the idea of special privileges for Brahmans. Himself a non-Brahman, being born into a respectable Śūdra family, he started the innovation of giving special spiritual ministration to Brahmans also, and this scandalised the orthodox. He was developing his creed and its cult for a number of years, and his tour over North India in the most important holy places during the prime of his life, from his 34th to his 46th year, made him receive all the influences from other reforming organisations within Hinduism, and also possibly from the Muslim way of approaching God. The hostility of the Brahmans, and the indifference of the Ahom Kings and sometimes their cruelty due to their fear of revolutionary doctrines upsetting the equilibrium of the state—Śankaradeva's own son-in-law was beheaded at the order of the Ahom King Su-hung-mung—made him leave his homeland near town of Nowgong within Ahom territory and seek asylum with the Koch Bihar king Naranārāyaṇa who was a rival of the Ahom king and was one of the greatest rulers in Eastern India—quite a worthy contemporary of great Mogul Emperor Akbar—his vast territory in Eastern India embracing the greater part

of North Bengal, Western Assam, East Bengal including Tippera and probably as far as Arracan, making him worthy of being designated as an Emperor of Eastern India.

6. *The* Eka-śaraṇa Dharma of *Śankara-deva, the Greatest Expression of Assamese Spiritual Outlook*

Śaṅkara-deva was enabled to preach the new faith he had established for himself and for earnest seekers in his province, basing it on the philosophical doctrines of the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as its scriptures, on the new interpretation of the doctrine of *Bhakti* and of the efficacy of repeating the name of God (*nāma*) and singing his praise (*kīrttana*) in congregational worship, and finally on an absolute and complete surrender of oneself to the will of the Lord. This was certainly a purer and a more spiritual form of religion than what the Śākta cults with their cruelty of bloodshed and the semi-Hinduised animistic religion of the Mongoloid masses could offer. Besides, it had behind it not only the force of the Ancient Scriptures like the *Rāmāyaṇa,* the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa,* but was in line with the religious movements that were going strong over the greater part of North India—movements which had both sail and ballast, in having elements both from the ancient *Bhakti* philosophy centering round the worship of Vishnu (particularly in his two incarnations of Rāma and Krishna) and from the Sufistic notions and practices which combined with the old Hindu worship of the *Nirguṇa* or attributeless Deity gave rise to the various monotheistic and reforming schools of neo-Hinduism, like the *Sant*-Cults of Kabir and others, and Sikhism of Guru Nānak.

Śaṅkara-deva founded the *Sattra* or Monastery at Patbausi near Barpeta to be the centre of his missionary work and a more important centre for the faith was set up at Barpeta by his disciple Mādhava-deva. Śaṅkara-deva was

not a celibate himself, and he wanted men and women to live normal lives. He was a Śūdra householder, but his greatest disciple who took over the leadership of his followers was also Kāyastha like his master, and he remained a celibate all his life—Mādhava-deva (1489-1596).

Śaṅkara-deva found in the Koch King Naranārāyaṇa and his brother Śukladhvaja (alias Cilā Rāy) good friends and patrons—Cilā Rāy in fact married a niece of Śaṅkara-deva. After establishing his mission and his reformed faith, when very old, in 1552 he undertook another pilgrimage, both to Puri and to religious centres in North India. It is not likely that during his first pilgrimage he met the Bengal reformer Chaitanya, whose position in Bengal was analogous to that of Śaṅkara-deva in Assam, possibly at Santipur; Chaitanya has not yet taken to the saffron garb of the Hindu monk. It is also just possible that Śaṅkara-deva met Kabīr, but there is no positive proof.

7. *Special Character of the Eka-śaraṇa Faith*

There are points of agreement between the *Eka-śaraṇa Dharma* of Śaṅkara-deva on the one hand and contemporary Vaishnavism of South India as well as the North Indian *Sant* Schools or sects. It is quite remarkable how Śaṅkara-deva's *Eka-śaraṇa* faith concentrated on the *dāsya* aspect of devotion to God, which conceived of man's relationship to God as that of a faithful slave to his Master. According to the Bengal Vaishnava tradition, Chaitanya's *bhakti* or faith in God was on the basis of another kind of relationship—that of love—the *madhura-bhāva* or self-forgetting love of a married woman (*parakīyā* or "another man's wife") for a lover which would impel her in her abandon of intense attachment to make light of everything that a good wife holds dear in life. These are of course figures of speech or examples to indicate the type of personal relationship favoured by the

devotee towards his God. God was worshipped as a personal deity in His essential nature as the Lord of the Universe, and there was no insistence on his dual nature as his *Śakti* or Energy, or Power, which makes his Godhead effective in the Universe. Poetry and Mythology have conceived the Godhead in its essential nature as *Puruṣa* or the Male, and the Energy or Might of the Godhead as *Śakti* or *Prakṛti,* the Force which is also Matter, as the Female Complement or Counterpart of the Male as His Wife. The *Eka-śaraṇa* faith worships only Vishnu, either as Vishnu or through his incarnations Kriṣṇa or Rāma, acknowledging of course the figure of Śrī or Rādhā or Śītā, but never thinking of the *Śakti* aspect as inseparable and worthy of the same honour or worship as the essential *Puruṣa* aspect of the Divinity. The amoral and antisocial ideal of the figure of the *parakīyā* has always had the risk of bringing in eroticism and even moral turpitude and this was carefully avoided by Śaṅkara-deva. During his long life, there were six great contemporaries of Śaṇkara-deva in the religious world of India—Chaitanya of Bengal (1485-1533), Vallabhāchārya of Andhra and Vrajamaṇḍala (1479-1531), Kabīr of Banaras (1398-1518), Nānak of the Panjab (1469-1539) and Tulasīdāsa in the United Provinces (? 1523-1623). Śaṇkara-deva's *Eka-śaraṇa Dharma,* or *Mahāpuruṣa Sect* as it is also called (because its leaders beginning with Śaṅkara-deva were great men—*Mahā-puruṣa*—by virtue not of birth but of faith in God) agreed more with the robust and manly path favoured by Kabīr and Nānak and later by Tulasīdāsa : it was the path of a man's straightforward faith in his Master, without his assuming the nature of a Woman. It was also democratic in its nature, inculcating commual worship with as simple a ritual as possible. In this sect, however, women had to be content with a subordinate position.

The *Eka-śaraṇa Dharma* of Śaṅkara-deva deserved to be better known in other parts of India, but each area developed

its own form of a common pan-Indian Vaishnava religion of faith in a loving God, and this, coupled with Assam's isolation, probably prevented a wider spread of the *Eka-śaraṇa* faith in lands outside Assam.

Śaṅkara-deva, as many competent authorities in Assam and Assamese life have said, brought Assam a new life, letters and a state. He gave to Assam a new discipline of faith in a single Divinity, and helped Assam to break away with a past with its complicated esoteric doctrines and its unmeaning practices, and gave to the people something simple and straightforward divested of all questionable associations or implications. He was the greatest builder of Assam by bringing in a purer spiritual life, and although circumstances prevented his influence from being spread into other parts of India, as a religious leader he is unquestionably one of the greatest India has produced, and he deserved to be mentioned with Saṅkarāchārya, Rāmānujāchārya Bāsavappa, Rāmānanda, Kabīr, Chaitanya, Mīra Baī, Guru Nānak and Tulasīdāsa. He was truly the medium through whom the spiritual light of Medieval India as a whole shone upon the life of Assam.

8. *King Naranārāyaṇa of North Bengal and West Assam: His Military and Cultural Achievements*

King Naranārāyaṇa of Koch Bihar geographically belongs to Bengal, but ethnically as North Bengal is an extension of the Boḍo land of Assam and East Bengal, and as he had under him a good part of Assam, he was a great link between Assam and Bengal; and culturally, also with the rest of India. He was one of the most significant figures of India during the 16th century, and he is one of the heroes of India who have remained confined in their glory to their own province—like Kriṣṇadeva Rāya of Vijayangara, who flourished during the earlier part of the same

century. Naranārāyaṇa belongs to both Bengal and Assam, and he had a glorious reign from 1533 to 1584. During this period, he and his brother Śukladhvaja, who acted as his intrepid general, made the Koch or Western Boḍo people attain to the highest pinnacle of their power, not only putting the Ahoms to check but also extending Koch power all over North Bengal and East Bengal down to Aracan. He was the son of a powerful Koch chief who founded the greatness of his family and his people during the closing years of 15th century, namely, Biśu or Viśva Siṃha (1496-1533), whose unique prowess was later celebrated by his people by giving him a divine pedigree as the son of Śiva by a Koch woman. Viśva Siṃha helped to bring about the complete Hinduisation of his people by supporting Brahmans, and as a staunch votary of Śiva and Durgā he had revived the Śākta shrine on the Kāmākhyā Hill near Gauhati. He sent two of his sons, including his eldest Naranārāyaṇa (also known as Malla Deva) to Banaras to study Sanskrit and fill themselves with the spirit of Brahmanism.

Naranārāyaṇa was great in both peace and war. A patron of Brāhmans and of orthodox Hinduism, he did not disdain the old Boḍo bases of the ancestral faith which evidently included the worship of the Great Mother, and he by encouraging syncretism brought about the transformation of the Boḍo-speaking Koches into the Bengali and Assamese-speaking Rajbansis in the course of a few generations. He encouraged translation of Sanskrit works into the common Aryan vernacular of North Bengal and Western Assam which can be claimed equally as Assamese and as Bengali (according as the writer or copyist of a particular work hailed from North Bengal or from Assam). In an early Assamese chronicle in verse (the *Darang-Rāj-Vaṃśāwālī*) it is mentioned how Naranārāyaṇa patronised Brāhman scholars, some of whom were brought over from Bengal

to compose original Sanskrit works or to render them in Bengali-Assamese. Purushottama Vidyāvāgīśa Bhattācharya composed the Sanskrit *Ratnamālā Vyākaraṇa*, Rama Saraswatī rendered into Assamese the *Mahābhārata*, and Śaṅkaradeva himself the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa;* and Śrīdhara wrote on Astronomy and Astrology. Other scholars compiled Sanskrit works on different branches of ancient Hindu learning and science under the patronage of the Koch king.

Naranārāyaṇa in this way strengthened more than any other ruler of medieval Assam the ties between Assam and the rest of Hindu India by making Sanskrit studies much more widespread than before and by bringing Sanskrit before the masses of Assam to a greater extent than ever.

9. *The Sanskrit Learning of Assam*

Assam, like other provinces of India, had its centres of Sanskrit learning. We may note the common use of Sanskrit in epigraphic documents in Assam from the Gupta period onwards, throughout the entire pre-Ahom ages. But owing to the disturbed state of the country, particularly in East Assam, through continuous fights among the Ahoms and the Boḍos, Assam for quite a long time, up to the 17th century, was not a suitable place for serious Sanskrit studies. In times before the coming of the Ahoms, Sanskrit had as much footing in Assam as in other parts of India, as the numerous Assam grants and inscriptions from the Gupta period onwards would amply testify. Probably the *Kālikā Purāṇa* and the *Yoginī Tantra* and several other Tantric works were composed in Assam. There was a high-flown epistolary style in Sanskrit which we find in the correspondence among the rules of Eastern India—the Ahom, Koch, Tipra and other rulers, in the 16th-18th centuries. Although Assam could not boast of Sanskrit Universities of the type of the

medieval Hindu seats of learning like Banaras, Gaya, Darbhanga (Mithilā), Puri, Navadwīpa and Śantipur, Sanskrit schools existed from the 16th century onwards at places in the Assam Valley and in North Bengal like Bardowa, Bandukā, Srī Hāṭī on the North Bank of the Brahmaputra, Vyāsakuchi, Hājo, Ratnapura and Behar (or Koch Bihār). The subjects taught were "the four *Vedas*, the fourteen *Śastras*, the eighteen *Purāṇas*, the *Mahābhārata*, the sixteen *Vyākaraṇas*, the eighteen *Kāvyas*, the eighteen *Koṣas*, and *Arthaśāstra*," besides *Yoga-śāstra* and texts on *Kāithālī* or Mathematics (the learning followed by Kāyasthas or clerks and Accountants). For advanced studies, Assamese students of Sanskrit would go to Mithilā (Darbhanga), Śāntipur and Navadwīp in Bengal, and to Banaras. In this way, and through pilgrimages to Gaya, Puri, Banaras, Prayāga and Vṛndāvana, Assam kept up her connexion with heart and brain of India as a whole during the entire medieval period of her history when the Ahoms and the Koches were the dominating peoples. A study of Assam's contribution to Sanskrit learning in the times before and after the Ahoms has not been attempted by any one, and this will be quite an instructive and informative study of one aspect of the culture of Assam in its pan-Indian setting or context.

10. *Decline in the Political Life of Assam during the 18th Century: Burmese Invasion*

The rules of the Ahom kings Gadādhar Siṃha and his son Rudra Siṃha saw the acme of Assam's glory as a medieval Hindu State, and after the latter's death in 1714 there was a steady decline of Ahom power and of Assamese political (though not cultural) life. Although the old lines of traditional life continued, the history of the Ahom State resolved itself into a procees of complete Hinduisation of the Ahoms, fights with the tribesman like the Daflas and the

Mikirs and Kacharis whom the Ahoms were still able to force to submission, and the rebellion of a section of the Vaiṣṇava subjects of the state, mostly man of the lower castes, who were known as the *Moāmarīās*, and who had refused to accept the superiority of the Brāhmans and other higher castes. Among the arts, painting and architecture developed, but there was a setback in political sagacity and unity for the good of the State. These happenings, with court intrigues, made for a rapid disintegration of the State, and one of the high officials of the State in the course of his intrigues persuaded the Burmese to come and attack Assam. After a short desultory war with the Burmese, the latter conquered in battles the Assamese forces and occupied the country from 1819 to 1824, and inflicted untold miseries upon the people. The Burmese ultimately came into conflict with the British, and finally the curtain was drawn over the scene of general misrule and suffering due to inner troubles and foreign aggression by making the Western part of the Brahmaputra valley come under the British in 1826. Assam for the first time in her history ceased to be an independent state.

11. *Stages in the Expansion of British Rule all over Assam : Assam Fully United with the Rest of India*

British rule introduced, for the first time in many decades, peace and order in Assam, and bit by bit, the whole of Assam was brought under British administration. As newer and newer tracts to the North and South of the Brahmaputra valley were being brought under the British, these were placed within the administrative unit of Assam : thus the Eastern Brahmaputra valley as an integral part of Assam proper, the Khasi State (1833 : the Garo Hills formed a part of Goalpara district), Kachar (1832), Jaintia Hills (1835), the Bhutan Duārs in the North, the Aka and Dafla country, the Naga Hills (which were slowly brought under

British rule, the process extending right up to 1878), and the Lushai Hills (1872). The Frontier Tribes were also gradually linked up with the British Government in Assam. Assam and the North-Eastern Frontier tracts, as they were being added to the British Indian Empire, were at first ruled over by the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal as part of the province of Bengal. But as Assam was naturally neglected owing to the Bengal province being too big and unwieldy, it was decided in the interest of Assam and her peoples to separate the province into an administrative unit indepedent of Bengal ; and in 1874, Assam, with all new additions, was formed into a Chief Commissionership. Certain new additions to British Indian territory in the North-east were joined to Bengal, but finally in 1898 the whole of what was Assam province at the time of the Partition of India (1947) was placed under a Chief Commissioner responsible to the British Indian Governmment under the Viceroy, in Calcutta and then in Delhi. Assam thus acquired the dignity of a new and self-contained state. In 1905 after the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon, Assam was joined up with East Bengal which was cut off from the rest of Bengal, under a Lieutenant Governor (the Lieutenant Governor of East Bengal and Assam), and this continued up to 1912. Then Assam was again separated from Bengal in 1912 after the annulment of the Bengal Partition, and we have a Chief Commissionership in Assam from 1912 to 1921, when it was raised to the dignity of a Governorship in 1921.

After 7 years of independence, when the importance of Assam as a vital spot in India as embracing the whole of its Eastern and North-Eastern frontier is becoming recognised, a new re-distribution of Assam has been envisaged, into an Assam proper (which should be the area of the Assamese language, to enable the Assamese-speaking people to develop to their fullest without interference or hadicap from peoples of other languages) and a North-Eastern Frontier Agency.

12. *Assam and Bengal*—Pros *and* Cons *for Assam of an Administrative Union for Three Generations*

During this last phase of her history, as an integral part of the Indian empire, the face of Assam was changed towards a totally new orientation. From isolation, it became active participation in the affairs of India. Her being linked up with Bengal for nearly three quarters of a century was, however, both an advantage and a disadvantage fo her. The country was opened up, and her volume of trade increased. The wider life of Bengal in modern or European education and in intellectual endeavour and achievement was made easily available to the people of Assam. This was for her advantage. The disadvantage lay in Assam being looked upon as a backward part of Bengal, the people of which spoke a language which was for a long time looked upon by Bengalis, and by many non-Bengalis too, as an uncouth dialect of Bengali. The use of the same script (with two special letters for Assamese) and a very general agreement in grammar was largely responsible for it, and there was no proper study of Assamese by outsiders except by a few Baptist Missionaries who sought to build up a modern and a Christian literature in Assamese. A whole host of clerks and petty officials from Bengal came in the wake of the British rulers, as Assam was not in a position for some three generations to supply the English-knowing personnel for taking part in the administration, and at their instance, the British Government, partly also to simplify matters, made Bengali the second language of the administration and the school in Assam. This kind of injustice to the actual language of the people was no new thing in the world. The addition of Orissa to the province of Bengal and Bihar led to the neglect and virtual suppression of the Oriya language in favour of Bengali in the schools and the law courts, and it largely was at the instance of some prominent Bengalis themselves who were in Orissa that the Oriya language was rehabilitated. The British law court and the English school

have led in two to three generations to the suppression of Maithili, Magahi and Bhojpuri, Chattigarhi, Bagheli and Awadhi, Garhwali and Kumaoni, and other Pahari dialects, Panjabi and Dogri and the Rajasthani and Malavi speeches, by Khariboli, Urdū and Hindī. The people of Bihar and of Eastern U.P. have been taught to regard Hindī, the language of Delhi and Meerut, as their mother-tongue, and they virtually despise their own home languages as forms of rustic patois, erroneously regarding them as dialects of Hindī.

13. *Linguistic Patriotism of the Assamese People*

But in Assam, and it must be said to the credit of the Assamese people, that, in spite of Assamese being much closer to Bengali than Maithili or Magahi or Bhojpuri or Garhwali is to Hindi, there was a patriotic feeling for their language, and protests against the use of Bengali to suppress Assamese started almost immediately after the establishment of British rule in Assam. The Christian Missionaries in Assam, Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson, were able to appreciate the racy qualities of pure Assamese and with their journal the *Oruṇodoi* (1846) and their Bible translations and other works sought to rehabilitate Assamese while it was neglected in the school and the law court. Ānandarām Dhekiyāl Phukan (1829-1859), as the first Assamese to distinguish himself in English learning for which he was sent to Calcutta, started the new literary movement in Assamese. He was a literary man and a patriot at the same time, and he has been called "the Ram Mohun Roy of Assam." The labours of men like Ānandarām restored her proper place to the Assamese language in her own home when in 1873, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir George Campbell, made Assamese the language of education and administration for its native speakers. And now, at least one Bengali scholar settled in Assam, the Engineer Raj Mohan Nath, has

sought to make partial atonement for the injustice done to Assam's language by serving the same language by his literary and other publications in it.

14. *Renaissance* of *Assamese Literature and of the Assamese Intellect* : *Calcutta the Intellectual Centre of India and Assam to* 1911

Assam now kept pace with other provinces of India in education and literary activity. Calcutta was the place to which Assamese students would resort in good numbers from the fourth quarter of the 19th century after the University of Calcutta became the great seat of Western education in Eastern India, and the modernising of Assam in thought and culture began. Later on, Gauhati and Jorhat also became other centres of Assamese literature and intellectual development. In 1889 a band of young Assamese trained in Calcutta sought to emulate the Bengalis in their creative zeal in literature by bringing out the well-known literary journal the *Jonākī* ("Moonlight") which marked an epoch in Assam. English and Bengali and to some extent also Sanskrit literatures were the main inspiration. Assam in this way received three of her greatest modern writers and thought-leaders : Hem Chandra Goswāmī (1872-1928), Lakshmīnāth Bezbaroā (1868-1938) who had married into the family of Rabindranath Tagore in Calcutta, and Chandrakumār Āgarwālā (1867-1938). These three writers established Assamese as a Modern Indian language a worthy sister of Bengali and Oriya, Urdu and Hindi and Gujarati and Marathi. Hem Chandra Goswāmī was a poet and critic, general essayist and student of Assamese literature, whose voluminous *Asamiyā Sāhityar Cāneki* or "Typical Selections from Assamese Literature" published at the instance of the late Sir Asutosh Mookerjee from the University of Calcutta forms a landmark in the study of Early Assamese literature, just as his edition of the *Hem-Koṣa*, an etymological dictio-

nary of Assamese compiled by Hem Chandra Baruā, was, until recently, the most authoritative dictionary of Assamese. Lakshmīnāth Bezbaroā was one of the most versatile of writers with an all-embracing genius and a wide knowledge of and sympathy for men and their ways. He was a poet, an essayist, a novelist, a dramatist, a critic, a humorous and satirical writer, and what not. He is easily one of the most comprehensive spirits in modern Indian literature. And Chandrakumār Āgarwālā, a romantic poet, kept pace with the other two writers in this great trio, by his humanism, his love of nature, his idealism and his intense qualities as writer.

15. *The* Intelligentsia *of Assam and Bengal*

Probably Assam agrees with Bengal in this, that the achievement of both the Assamese and Bengali speakers during the last 100 years during their contact with the British people has been mainly in the field of creative literature and scholarship rather than in business or industry. Gujrat and Rajasthan are in the forefront in Modern India as provinces which have produced the most successful businessmen and industrialists, and both Bengal and Assam have had their resources developed and their resources exploited to the fullest by Marwaris from Rajasthan. But Assam, like Bengal, has produced a large number of poets and prosateurs, scholars and historians, and some notable students of language, besides one or two film artists of All-India importance, the late Pramathesh Baruā, who will be all too numerous to mention in the present context; and the writings of the top-ranking Assamese writers deserve to be much more widely known through adequate translations in Bengali, English and Hindi.

16. *Anundoram Borooah's Place as a Scholar of Sanskrit and an Administrator*

Mention must be made of another great son of Assam who if he were spared long enough could attain to India-wide

eminence; he is Anundoram Borooah (1850-1889). A brilliant student of the Presidency College of Calcutta, he went to England and returned after three years' stay in 1872 as the first Assamese Barrister and I.C.S. man—the 5th among Indian members of this Service. He was a contemporary and friend of men like Surendra Nath Banerji, Ananda Mohan Bose, Romesh Chandra Dutt and Biharilal Gupta. He was a great scholar of French too, and acquired a very high degree of proficiency in Sanskrit. He was an administrator of high calibre, having served as a Magistrate in many parts of Bengal, but he found time for literary and linguistic pursuits, and in addition to his very valuable English-Sanskrit Dictionary, he edited a number of Sanskrit texts, literary, grammatical and lexical; and he planned on a very large scale a comprehensive grammar of Sanskrit in 12 volumes. His Sanskrit scholarship obtained universal praise, from scholars like Friedrich Max Mueller (who wrote about his grammar, when he first got the scheme—"I confess I feel almost overwhelmed by the grandeur of it") and others (the *Lahore Tribune* in 1887 wrote about him—"Mr. Borooah's Sanskrit scholarship is as profound and accurate as it is extensive. We are proud of him as a nation"). This scholarship of his in Sanskrit alone would be his great claim to fame among posterity, apart from his significant place in the life of Assam and India. A confirmed bachelor, he passed away in his fortieth year, and this untimely death was an irreparable loss to Assam, Bengal and India.

17. *The Place of Assam in the Union of India*

The scholars and political workers and statesmen of Assam are helping to build up a new India, Assam took her share in the struggle for India's political freedom. When a wave of nationalistic unrest filled the whole country of India in 1905 with the anti-Partition agitation in Bengal and

the Swadeshi Movement, political consciousness was roused in Assam through an institution like the Assam Association founded in 1906. In 1912, Assam linked herself with the rest of India by joining the Congreess Movement for freedom, when the Indian National Congress was established in Assam, too. After the attainment of her freedom, India has received from Assam some statesmen of an all-India importance. They are adding to Assam's and India's roll of honour. Assamese leaders are now called to participate in the Government of India from the Centre, and for the first time in her history, the state of Assam has supplied members to the panel of a Ministry for the whole of India. We had as one of the Deputy Ministers in the Centre the late Surendranath Burhāgohāin, whose untimely death some months ago in Calcutta has been a great loss to the Indian administration.

18. *Conclusion*

Assam, with its chequered history, has taken her share in the evolution of the civilisation of India, and at particular periods she has contributed to the enrichment of Indian civilisation in various ways. Assam's most intense period of participation appears to have been in the middle of the first millennium A.D., when the fusion of Aryan and Mongoloid and Austric and Dravidian was well under way—particularly during the reign of King Bhāskara-varman. Assam was the great reservoir of the fourth element in the formation of the Indian people—the Kirāta or Mongoloid. She was the oldest route for our cultural connexion with the great country of China, and possibly the art of preparing silk and silk cloth came to India from China through Assam. Tantric Saktaism as a component element in Hinduism seems to have developed along the lines in which we find it in Eastern India on the soil of Assam. Assam then participated in the common religious life of post-Turki India, through *Bhakti* and the

cult of repeating God's name (*nāma-dharma*). The isolation of Assam through her independence, combined with her geographical position at an extreme end of India, were a handicap towards her association with other states or North India brought together under the yoke of the Delhi Sultanate, but Hindu influences were mutually operative between Assam on the one hand and Bengal and other States to her West on the other. From the British period onwards, this handicap of isolation has been broken, and the distinctive culture of the various peoples within the borders of Assam, with certain artistic creations like the fine silk and cotton weaves of both Assam valley and the hill areas, and the distinctive dances of the Manipuris, the Nagas, the Khasis and other peoples, besides the Bihu songs and dances of the valley of the Brahmaputra, are acquiring a pan-Indian position. The Assam Government and the public of Assam should be fully alive to the necessity of making available to the public of both Assam and the outside world the rich literary, historical and artistic treasures which are being collected by her scholars and historians and enthusiasts for the old culture of the country. The literary, linguistic and artistic treasures accumulated, for example, in the Kāmarūpa Anusandhān Samiti, the Gauhati Museum, the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, at Gauhati, in many a private collection, should be published and explained, and this will greatly help Assam to be established in her rightful place among the different component states of India and will enable all and sundry to appreciate Assam's position in the history and culture of India. And Assam statesmen and scholars are now more than ever before contributing their share and doing their bit in building up a strong and prosperous and happy India, and in helping to shape her history and in developing her civilisation in the present world.

Jaya Kāmarūpa : Jaya Bhārata